

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Theses - ALL

December 2014

Black Effugium: Meditations on traveling, on understanding, and on connecting in the tradition of Black writers

Calvin Walds
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/thesis>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walds, Calvin, "Black Effugium: Meditations on traveling, on understanding, and on connecting in the tradition of Black writers" (2014). *Theses - ALL*. 83.

<https://surface.syr.edu/thesis/83>

This is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses - ALL by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Abstract summary

For neither I nor anyone else could have known from the beginning what roads we would travel, what choices we would make, nor what the results of these choices would be; in ourselves, in time and space, and in that nightmare called history.

James Baldwin

“Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption” July 29th, 1979

This thesis project is a series of meditations, thoughts, reflections, lingering and fleeting, that move between three geopolitical locations: Bijlmermeer, Amsterdam; Kasoa, Ghana; and Detroit, Michigan. These locations are principally connected by virtue of my travels and work in all three in the summer of 2013. On a deeper level, one that this thesis elucidates, these three locations represent three different, yet connected, modalities of Black movement and existence. A modality is a mode, a single aspect or condition of a larger phenomenon. I begin in the mid-20th century, in Europe, with James Baldwin, Vincent Carter, and Richard Wright with a focus on their non-fiction writing composed while traveling abroad in the late 1950s. Through these three authors I consider the narrative and conceptual techniques employed as each undertakes reflection on the ‘self’, the ‘other’, and one’s national home. This chapter is grounded in (Black) existentialism and employs the works of Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon as analytical frameworks. The latter three chapters each focus on a specific modality of movement. *Migration*: Amsterdam picks up on the discordant notes played when Black American travelers, seeking to escape the conditions of Blackness in the United States, meet Dutch Caribbean migrants who are dealing with experiences of post-coloniality in a xenophobic European metropole. The principal literature engaged includes Heather Neff’s novel *Haarlem*; Stew’s musical *Passing Strange*; Anton de Kom’s *We Slaves of Suriname*; and the performance art of Musa Okwonga. *Voluntourism*: Ghana is composed entirely of my own literary travel writing that is based on notes and observations from my time volunteering in Kasoa, Ghana addressing child labor issues in three fishing communities. This chapter reflects on a variety of concerns ranging from post-coloniality and race, neoliberalism and NGO work, and the ironic dimensions of Western travelers seeking to find a mode of existence beyond capitalistic relations. *Automobility*: the last chapter on Detroit is based around my return home at the end of the summer and offers reflections on the relationship between the automobile and the material conditions of Detroit (and of Blackness). In this chapter I argue that analytical work on Black social life, in this instance automobility and hip-hop culture, requires one to think beyond dominant representations and frameworks of understanding Blackness so that one does not reify status-quo, denigrating ideas of Black life used to justify social death. The conclusion ends with a concise yet poignant statement that for the Black subject moving through the aftereffects and afterlives of enslavement, apartheid, and colonialism: the process of traveling is about healing, about escape into togetherness, and into thinking and living beyond and beneath.¹

¹ **Etymology:** from effugiō (“to escape, flee from, avoid, shun”)

Noun: effugium an escape, flight; a means or way of escape.

Noun: effugium an escape, flight; a means or way of escape.

² “to consent not to be a single being” By Fred Moten (2010)

Black Effugium:

On Three Modalities of Movement

Meditations on traveling, on understanding, and on connecting in the tradition of Black writers

By

Calvin Tyrone Walds
B.A. Albion College, 2012

Master's Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Masters of Arts in Pan-African Studies
in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

December 2014

Copyright 2014 Calvin Tyrone Walds
All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgements

I wrote to each of you in the text.

Dr. Mugo

The inextinguishable light at the end of the tunnel, exemplar of strength, poetics in thought and action, the reminder of hope (uncited but present throughout). Even in the most tumultuous of circumstance—the fragility of life—there exists love and perseverance.

Dr. Bryant and Dr. Winders and Dr. Ruffin

For helping me believe that my ideas can make sense, for your unblinking assistance in my own arrival to consciousness.

Dr. Campbell and Dr. Carty

For helping me understand the material makings of the world, and of Blackness.

The writers who inspired and challenged me throughout this project.

I believe in the dialogic. A text is only a composition, a polyphony of other texts and voices.

Friends and Family

A given.

Blackness

I understand more than I understood before. A progression in thought is a progression in love a progression in love is an increase in one's willingness to open oneself to the conditions, peoples, experiences, and feelings of the world in Black, a difficult world—"for the music began in captivity" as Baldwin wrote—but such beauty you created from it.

Table of Contents

PREFACE.....	1
INTRODUCTION	2
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.....	3
BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM.....	6
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	15
HYPOTHESIS	16
JUSTIFICATION	17
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS.....	21
METHODOLOGIES.....	32
OPERATIVE DEFINITIONS	33
SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS	35
CHAPTER 1: THREE BLACK MEN IN EUROPE.....	36
OPENING NOTES:.....	37
PART 1: JAMES BALDWIN'S <i>PARIS ESSAYS</i>	42
PART 2: VINCENT CARTER'S <i>THE BERN BOOK: A RECORD OF A VOYAGE OF THE MIND</i>	51
PART 3: RICHARD WRIGHT'S <i>PAGAN SPAIN</i>	70
CHAPTER CONCLUSION:	82
CHAPTER 2: AMSTERDAM.....	84
OPENING NOTES:.....	85
PART 1: ANTON DE KOM AND DUTCH COLONIALISM	88
PART 2: PRESENCE AND ABSENCE AND MOVEMENT AND BLACKNESS.....	94
PART 3: HEATHER NEFF'S <i>HAARLEM</i>	99
CONCLUDING COMMENTS: ON STEW'S <i>PASSING STRANGE</i>	117
CHAPTER 3: GHANA.....	123
OPENING NOTES: THE CONDITIONS OF ARRIVAL	124
THE AIRPORT	128
SENYA	141
MATERIAL FOCUS AND THE LOSS OF OPTIMISM.....	148
THE OCEAN IN THE DAYTIME/THE OCEAN AT NIGHT.....	151
CAPITALISTIC PAN-AFRICANISM/THINKING BEYOND	155
DEPARTURE/ NIGHT PRIOR	158
CHAPTER 4: DETROIT.....	162
OPENING NOTES:.....	163
2 DIMENSIONS OF DEATH: URBAN AND SOCIAL	171
HIP-HOP BEYOND LYRICS: FORAYS INTO THE BEAT	179
THE PROBLEMATICS OF REPRESENTATION:.....	182
SWERVING AWAY: CONCLUDING COMMENTS	191
CONCLUSION: BLACK EFFUGIUM	193
PREFATORY REMARKS AT THE DEPARTURE GATES	194
ON FUGITIVE DREAMS	199
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	203
ON FUTURE WORK	205
WORKS CITED AND REFERENCED	206
VITA:	213

List of Illustrative Materials

Chapter 3: Ghana

Kasoa, Ghana	131
Rainstorm in Peacetown.....	134
Child Labor Interview (Senya)...	137
Jackie and I in Peacetown.....	143
Beachfront in Fettah.....	147
Schoolchildren in Nyanyano.....	151
Diane in Peacetown.....	152
Mountain in Hohoe.....	156

Chapter 4: Detroit

Detroit Freeway System.....	164
Detroit Census Map.....	165
Construction of Chrysler Freeway...	170
Detroit Freeway.....	172

Preface

In 2012, while still an undergraduate student, I, like many human and minority rights advocates, was mourning the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. I was just completing my senior honors thesis on James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, and, thus, my response to the tragedy was informed by their work: I was puzzled as to why George Zimmerman, and everything he represents, could not recognize Trayvon Martin's humanity. James Baldwin's writing speaks to how one of the main consequences of the invention of race is that it prevents human beings from seeing each other's humanity. It is as if racialized skin blocks the human subject from emerging. We use many false words and ideas to layer on top of human beings, words and ideas that can prevent the human from being seen. How can we ever emerge from the tragedy of race if we cannot recognize, cannot see the commonalities—how we all breathe, see, taste, hear, and feel—that we share? Of course, out of the tragedy of race emerged solidarities and coalitions that recognized the humanity of racialized people; the histories of Blackness—of acts of resistance, large and small, of radical love in the time of estrangement—emerge out of the history of race.

Confronted with the sheer, brutal facticity of Blackness—the Fanonian one mixed with a little (an abundance) of Jimmy Baldwin—without disguise or makeup, without a rag to clean its bloody face, I sometimes question my religion. Not religion as Christianity or Islam, but my belief in Sam Cooke's soulful prayer that a “change is gonna come”, my belief in the soothing, far-sighted condolences that “we shall overcome someday”, my belief that is sustained only by rituals of remembrance that the Mandelaian walk, that King's arc, the Ancestors' trail, to freedom is long. I glance at the world and see the perpetuations of violence, the continuities of a past, a present, a future, that we global denizens of over-and-under-developed formerly, currently, ambiguously colonial nations, we human beings, have claimed to be behind us (or, at least some of us have). This thesis project—a composition of the thoughts, analysis, and experiences of a 21st-century *native son* trying to understand the world in the tradition of politicized, traveling Black writers—is, partly, about recognizing those continuities—for the spaces of captivity only changed forms—and maintaining a belief—you can call it spiritual—that radical (fugitive) escape, a being beyond and beneath, in-between and nowhere—and music can be magic—exists—that there remains an outside to madness, an outside *in* madness, with just enough light to help us find each other—which is not to say that one cannot see in the darkness.

Introduction

If we could break down those walls to set you free, we would
Cause we're out here, and we miss you
If we could build a ladder that tall to come up and see you, we would
Cause we're down here, and we miss you

Lupe Fiasco, featuring Gemini and Sarah Green
"Free Chilly" track 2 on Lupe Fiasco's *The Cool*

Statement of the Problem

Perhaps it was the reveling in enslavement with two sections of undergraduate students under bright Syracuse lights, peering up at their bright brown listening faces glancing up from texts we read—Fredrick Douglass’ Autobiography—that constant elision, the swerve away, hitting the edges, bouncing off, hiding in cracks and crevices in this country of dream and nightmare. A fleeing off in dark and light finding water escape water. Here the *fuge* of movement hit and remained, captivated I, so clear it seemed to fit triangularly into the history presence of Blackness, it wasn’t travel—but escape.

Black

Effugium

Fred Moten talks about gliding and sliding—and I swerving (perhaps a result of the generational shift from jazz to hip-hop)—writing “But this gliding is rough, tossed, rolled by water, flung by waves... This opacity of gliding is chorographic philosophy, thinking on the move, over the edge... roots escaping from themselves without schedule into the outer depths...”²

See. I have just made a move, a swerve, a bringing in a tangential quotation broken into pieces without direct relation an insert of poetry abstract fleeting lacking concise meaning to give feeling not fact—a move that is central to the thought exercise underpinning this project, that makes this project different—my attempt to escape representation, lets call it: easy Blackness, linear lines, surface tensions.

Black

Escape

Effugium is etymologically a verb that can be used as noun; it is an act a being not a description just as Black is verb not noun not person place thing but action state relation between two things like “person and state” the verb conveys what is happening—I ran We run Run Faster—it is the most transient of grammar. Perhaps it was the realization that are still running never stopped running that

² “to consent not to be a single being” By Fred Moten (2010)

running is a desire for elsewhere that may be unknown but just not here. Maybe the verb is trying to escape the noun—Black—change the relation.

This project is interdisciplinary. It moves, like the writers and ideas in consideration, between disciplines and perspectives with a preference for a state of conceptual restlessness to stasis. This interdisciplinary nature is partially due to this project's inhabitation in the field of Black studies, a field that keeps its eye, like the neck of the Sankofa bird, dually on the past and the present as the future we are creating glimmers at the horizon. Black people have a long history of using creativity, arts and culture, to explore political, economic, geographical, and social issues. The works of Fanon, of Douglass, of Morrison, even in translation, are all the more searing due to their beautiful, tragic poetics. This project has embraced the tradition of poetic politics as it deploys an idea of travel that is not only conceptual but also methodological. Travel is a way of inhabiting different sites-- literary studies, political theory, philosophy and critical theory, and geography-- as ways of understanding aspects of the (Black) world and experience that are, eventually, illuminated as dynamically interconnected. Travel writing has been neglected, especially the travel writing of Black writers which have simply been anthologized and not critically engaged. Further, the study of literature has often remained focused on the text. The researcher, the geographies, and the philosophies of the living world that flow within and without the text often remain unseen. This project has, instead, been created through a methodology that is innovative not only because of its interdisciplinary nature but also through its engagement with cultural geographies- geographies that I, straddling the lines of researcher and writer, traveled through in order to give life to the texts, the texts of Blackness, to peer beyond its boundaries in an academic environment that is often problematically separated and unappreciative of the humanities.

Pan-African solidarities are especially needed in the wake of the neoliberal economic regime operating under an often-concealed racial contract. Advances in transportation and communicative technologies have allowed humans to connect in ways once unimaginable, but one must not forget that the processes of globalization are embedded in a complex web of material and ideological power, violence, and domination, as well as historical legacies of enslavement, colonialism, imperialism, and ethnocentrism – all of which are components of the economic regime of capitalism. Even though the flows of globalization are allowing human connections to form across

boundaries of geography, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, ideology, gender and sexuality, the capitalist task of accumulating the most profit at the lowest cost and the development of a multinational circuit of resource extraction and consumption not only deepen inequality between different geopolitical localities, but also deteriorate the broader biosphere in which we live amongst other organisms. One of the principal contradictions of globalization is how many people around the world have a limited or compromised right to freely move and travel throughout the world. Poor migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, especially those of African descent (from Haiti to Somalia), are often excluded from the freedom and benefits of increased human mobility.

These social-political and economic problems of our contemporary moment, birthed in the past amplified by the presents, the gaps in the production of knowledge that leaves Blackness separated and exiled from other disciplinary fields, the interplay between increased policing—policing of boundaries, borders, communities, economies, and ideas—and the resistance to that policing, the constant elision, running away in a non-linear approach, is the space in which the necessity of this thought project emerges, a necessity that requires *Black Effugium* to undertake an inventive, interdisciplinary inquiry that, previously, went under-engaged by those interested in the complexities of Black movement.

Background To The Problem

Human movement across, between, and within geopolitical spaces is, arguably, one of the central tenants of Pan-Africanism. From the Middle Passage's circulatory voyage of human bondage on top the Atlantic Ocean to the diasporic migratory journeys of people of African descent in the Caribbean and the Americas to the experiences of many peoples living on the African continent and beyond the continent as refugees or in exile – all have sought to survive dispersal without sanctuary, to return, reclaim, and renew. Pan-Africanism is a historically informed cartography of passageways, linkages, and routes that have sought to connect peoples scattered upon different, but never discrete, geographies, languages, nationalities, sociopolitical and economical contexts, and cultural histories, in hopes of uncovering commonalities in experiences and siphoning the power of collectivism and solidarity. Because 'home', for people of African descent particularly, has continually been contested, threatened, and often wholly destroyed as collateral damage in the search for capital and material goods or violently usurped to make room for whiteness by excising Blackness, human movement has often been required of individuals, families, and communities throughout the Pan-African world who then had to work to find and build new homes in foreign places.

Human movement, from capture and kidnapping, trafficking, migration, dispersal, and exile, are central facets of the Pan-African and African diasporic experience. During the 20th and 21st centuries, artists and activists throughout the Pan-African world traveled, migrated, returned, and departed, crisscrossing time and space and writing about their experiences, from the existential to the cultural. In the process of writing about travel, writers often reconstruct their preconceptions about a foreign place and the people who live there, thus allowing stereotypes to disseminate and naturalize amongst the readers. Travel writing involves the foregrounding of the traveler's subjectivity; that is, self-enquiry and self-exploration are central components as the writer uncovers a deeper understanding of the self in the presence of the foreign place or Other. After the geographic scattering of the Middle Passage and the seizure of home during colonialism, the Pan-African movement sought to redraw the map of alterity and separation into a diaspora, a reconstituted home with appendages and lines of connections, not boundaries, drawn by the humans, from W.E.B

Dubois to Maya Angelou³, who refused to be confined to a world of oppositions – e.g. the global versus the local, tradition versus modernity, the secular versus the sacred, and the body versus the mind. The canon of Black travel writing dates back to the sixteenth century with *Leo Africanus: A Geographical History of Africa* in which the author, Leo Africanus, describes the peoples, customs, economic practices, architecture, deserts, mountains, flora and fauna of various African cities.

Travel writing and the notion of migration began to transform in the context of movement within Pan-Africanism. Richard Wright, the African-American writer, traveled to Ghana in 1953 and detailed his diasporic Black experience in *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*. In this book he did not seek to discover the people of Ghana but rather, to understand the moment of severance, as Ngwarsungu Chiwengo argues, “searching for the self in one’s original historical place of reference and then reconstructing the self in the mirror of that racial self.”⁴ Black or Pan-African travel writing is connected to authors’ journeys toward self-actualization as they travel to define and assert their existential identity – as illustrated in Richard Wright’s poetic reflection on his journey in Indonesia, “... Cutting through the outer layers of disparate social and political and cultural facts down to the bare brute residues of human existence: races and religions and continents” (*The Color Curtain*).⁵

The history of African-American writing evidences a journey of writers claiming an American identity, experiencing a form of racialized exile from America, before cultivating diasporic connections with other Black and anti-racist people around the world. Charting out diasporic connections with individuals beyond the confines of one’s nation-state is often done through writing, through envisioning through text. In the introduction to *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, Isidore Okpewho defines diaspora as “as global space, a worldwide web, that

³ Angelou, Maya. *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. New York: Random House, 1986. Print.

⁴ Smith, Virginia Whatley. and Ngwarsungu Chiwengo. "Richard Wright's Africa." *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2001. Print.

⁵ Wright, Richard. *Black Power: Three Books from Exile ; Black Power ; The Color Curtain, and ; White Man, Listen! / Richard Wright*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. Print.

accounts as much for the mother continent as for wherever in the world her offspring may have been driven by the unkind forces of history.”⁶

One such literary artist who moved and established connections throughout global spaces is James Baldwin, who was asked in an interview in a 1984 issue of the *Paris Review* how he first came to leave the United States, to which he responded:

I was broke. I got to Paris with forty dollars in my pocket, but I had to get out of New York. My reflexes were tormented by the plight of other people. Reading had taken me away for long periods at a time, yet I still had to deal with the streets and the authorities and the cold. I knew what it meant to be white and I knew what it meant to be a nigger, and I knew what was going to happen to me. My luck was running out. I was going to go to jail, I was going to kill somebody or be killed. My best friend had committed suicide two years earlier, jumping off the George Washington Bridge.⁷

James Baldwin’s answer encapsulates the various dimensions of his racialized being in America as he speaks across economic, sociopolitical, inter-personal, and embodied experiences. His reflexes tormented, he could no longer escape the dire realities of his immediate material world through reading, as those realities surrounded him as he walked through New York City streets and affected him on a psychophysical level, his consciousness and his body. He states that reading had taken “me” away, in a reference to his subjective self, but as a physical embodied being, he could not escape the cold and the State in the form of authorities. He saw himself heading toward the existential crisis of the Black man: a state of being that often ends with a violent demise, whether it is in death or the annihilation of the truer self. Particularly devastating about Baldwin’s answer is that it likely reflects the sentiments of contemporary young Black men who still exist in a context in which, as Aime Ellis writes, “racial terror and state violence appear increasingly removed from view and deemed largely immaterial next to the self-annihilating impulse of poor urban Black men capitulating to their own reckless, sometimes studied, demise” (4).⁸ Baldwin’s reaction to the ‘violent space’ of America was exodus. His will to live and pursue freedom “without fear of death” (Ellis 5) drove his departure from the confines of the nation-state. Simply leaving the United States was not enough to ensure

⁶ Okpewho, Isidore, Carole Boyce Davies, and Ali Al Amin. Mazrui. *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. Print.

⁷ Elgrably, Jordan. "James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78." Interview. *Paris Review* 1984: Print.

⁸ Ellis, Aimé J. *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 2011. Print.

Baldwin's survival, however. He quickly ran out of money and soon became sick, and it took other human beings to step across boundaries of difference and overcome anxiety over the racialized stranger to help him survive. As he states,

Then I got sick. ... This Corsican family, for reasons I'll never understand, took care of me. An old, old lady, a great old matriarch, nursed me back to health after three months; she used old folk remedies. And she had to climb five flights of stairs every morning to make sure I was kept alive.⁹

Such serendipitous, yet crucial, encounters and relationships are central to movement, especially the movement of Black American artists and writers traveling abroad, often with a lack of social and economic capital. The question, which may be difficult to discern but will be addressed within this project, is whether individuals help Black American travelers out of a human concern or because they are, at least partially, American, a form of capital in and of itself. As Chinua Achebe once said, James Baldwin traveled with the Empire behind him.¹⁰ One can look toward how such moral cosmopolitanism seems to dissipate when considering how the experiences of Black migrants and asylum seekers are often much more difficult, perhaps because of the larger scale at which they take place and the history of colonialism between Europe and the Global South.

Moral cosmopolitanism's call for individuals to have a moral concern for human beings beyond the confines of their particular nationality seems to be an ideal type of moral global citizenship. Contemporary cosmopolitanism, however, grew out of NAFTA free trade agreements, which lessened regulations on the trade of capital and materials as a component of neoliberalism, an ideological position that calls for the reduction of State in favor of conditions that promote free trade flows.¹¹ Neoliberalism has detrimentally impacted the Global South on economic and sociopolitical grounds and contributed to the entrenchment of global inequalities in the ostensible

⁹ Elgrably, Jordan. "James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78." Interview. *Paris Review* 1984: Print.

¹⁰ Achebe, Chinua. *Home and Exile*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 92-93. Print.

Achebe wrote, "Even James Baldwin returning to America from France in a casket and W.E.B. Du Bois finding a resting place in Ghana... Diverse as their individual situations or predicaments were, these children of the West roamed the world with the confidence of the authority of their homeland behind them."

¹¹ Weik, Alexa. "The Uses and Hazards of Expatriation": Richard Wright's Cosmopolitanism in Process." *African American Review* 41.3 (2007): 459-75. *Jstor*. Web. 2014.

“post” colonial moment when former colonies received independence and began to enter global markets.

Moving Into The Bass Booming Automobile

This project’s focus on movement (travel) does not solely regard passages across national borders and great bodies of water. Keeping its material purview on sociopolitical and economic structures, movement is extended to the post-industrial city, specifically Detroit, where Black Americans travel on concrete freeways and bridges across the crumbling built landscape, creating new meanings that exist beyond the ruins and renewed modes of sociality that awaken the earth beneath the streets. This consideration of post-industrial automotive movement is inspired by the work of Paul Gilroy, who has engaged Blackness and automobiles throughout his corpus of work. His book, *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture*, is composed of lectures delivered as part of the W.E.B. Dubois lecture series at Harvard University in which he critiqued the stagnancy of African-American Studies programs. In his first chapter, “Get Free or Die Tryin,” Gilroy draws on the sociopolitical and economic history of the automobile to forge connections between race, commodities or objects for consumption, and globalization. He suggests that in the 20th century, the idea of freedom came to be measured by one’s capacity for mobility. This “automotivity” occupies a central place in the American imaginary as one can envision images of driving across the Wild West, down into the tumultuous South, or even trapped in gridlocked cities. Gilroy analyzes how car ownership signaled a form of arrival in middle-class America, as buying a car is both a form of consumerism indicating participation in capitalist society and linked to recognition of humanity and individuality. He argues that having the capacity to purchase confers a respect that takes the place of recognition of one’s human-ness. In connecting this consumerism to race, Gilroy characterizes the desire to be “King of the Road,” and thus in control of one’s own destiny, as deeply appealing to Black Americans for whom such control has seemed distant (21). The Depression of the 1930s may have weakened the racial barriers to such consumption. Companies, such as Chrysler, that had previously been uninterested in selling to Black buyers became less racist when macroeconomic developments threatened their bottom lines (49). In this way, Gilroy notes, it is possible to suggest

that the Depression expanded opportunities for those with money or credit who could trade their 'infra-human' or less-than-human status for that of an anti-political consumer.¹²

The connections that Gilroy draws between consumption and one's acquiescence to human and middle class underpin my question whether there was embedded in civil and sociopolitical rights: the "freedom to consume." By "freedom to consume" I mean the freedom to participate fully in America's consumer culture and to purchase American dreams. How has this freedom to consume contributed to the contemporary super-exploitation of lower and working-class citizens? This question is drawn from a broader burgeoning interest in Black material culture. In engaging Black material culture, it is important to go beyond critiquing it simply as materialistic or superficial, as many have done in regards to its hyperbolic expression in hip-hop music, and to instead understand the seemingly unique relationship Black Americans have with materials and objects in light of the historical legacies of violence and disfranchisement from the political-economic sphere, as well as the spaces and things of consumption. To engage these questions, this project also explores Detroit's car culture, specifically the embodied dimensions of riding around the post-industrial city. How does riding in the car while listening to music subjectively re-define post-industrial space? Detroit is often represented as a gloomy, dismal city of ruins. By going beyond representation, seeing the city as fluid and dynamic, exploring the affective, embodied dimensions of movement through space, and recognizing human agency, one can better understand post-industrial space and its relationship to human beings.

Detroit is no stranger to representation. In starting his book *AfterCulture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History*, Jerry Herron notes:

This is a book about Detroit; it is also, unavoidably, a book about representation because Detroit is the most representative city in America. Detroit used to stand for success, and now it stands for failure. In that sense, the city is not just a physical location; it is also a project, a projection of imaginary fears and desires.¹³

Since Detroit's high-profile decline over the last half century, the city has often functioned as both a dystopian image of a probable urban future and an isolated vision of urban decline. Herron and

¹² Gilroy, Paul. *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010. Print.

¹³ Herron, Jerry. *AfterCulture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993, 9

other Detroit scholars reference newscaster Diane Sawyer's 1990 visit to Detroit in which she opened with:

Our first story is not a story about a city...It's a story about some Americans who may be sending a kind of warning to the rest of us...Detroit, once a symbol of U.S. competitive vitality, and some say still a symbol: a symbol of the future, the first urban domino to fall."¹⁴

Yet Detroit is also antithetical to the recent rehabilitation and gentrification of cities like New York, Washington DC, and Pittsburgh, as it remains in popular imagination incapable of transcending its own social ills to move forward in some version of capitalist urban development. The images of the city's decline have come to function as evidence that Detroit is everything the rest of the country is not: "black and violent, sick, abandoned, poor," as Herron puts it.¹⁵

In the focus on what is visible to the eye, the fixation on the decaying, ruinous aspects of the post-industrial city, one must ask what is being neglected, missed, in the emphasis on static representation. What happened to imagination, to exploring unforeseen possibilities that lie in between the world that we see everyday? This question can be extended to criticism and analysis on hip-hop music, where there seems to be a disproportionate focus on the problematic lyrics of the music as it becomes,

... [an] auditory enemy to the establishment, a symbolic musical scapegoat, blamed for the ills of society. As such, it exists as the perfect anthem for the disaffected, those social scapegoats who are also branded as a threat to order, condemned as the root of society's problems.¹⁶

In engaging movement throughout post-industrial space in automobiles playing music one should employ imagination in grappling with the beat, the radiating, thumping essence of music that gives it the capacity to transform and renew what the eye thinks it sees. As Brandon Labelle writes,

Auditory knowledge is a radical epistemological thrust that unfolds as a spatio-temporal event: sound opens up a field of interaction, to become a channel, a fluid, a flux of voice and urgency, of play and drama, of mutuality and sharing, to ultimately carve out a micro-geography of the moment...¹⁷

¹⁴ Herron, *AfterCulture*, 15

¹⁵ Herron, *AfterCulture*, 15

¹⁶ *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience* edited by Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (4)

¹⁷ *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (xvii)

Ghana, Travel, and the Continuities of History

Jemima Pierre, an anthropologist of the African diaspora who was born in Haiti, recounts a startling moment of walking into an expatriate bar in Accra, Ghana in her rich ethnography *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race*. She writes,

I remember the first time I walked in Champs, a popular sports bar in Accra known for its Mexican cuisine [...] My first reaction as we ducked through the front door and stepped down into the basement-like venue was shock. This shock was quickly followed by extreme discomfort [...] Its patrons are primarily expatriates and overwhelmingly White [...] As a Black subject and researcher encountering a Champs in postcolonial Ghana was disturbing to me also because it was a local articulation of a historical global political economy of race and power. The scene at Champs provides a window into the forms of White power in post-colonial Africa.¹⁸

Pierre's ethnography focuses on the constructions, perceptions, and performances of Blackness and whiteness in contemporary Ghana and she argues that the process of racialization, working within a global framework of white supremacy, interlinks continental Africans and the people of African descent throughout the continent. Present-day Ghana has been shaped by the failure of 20th century nationalists, such as Kwame Nkrumah, to fully dismantle the racialized structures of imperialism as they instead chose to protect their positions of power, as she writes: "Nkrumah and his political party, the CPP, made compromises that reflected the contradictory nature, and compromised position, of a non-revolutionary transition mediated by and through the terms of the former colonial master." (48) Pierre references a poignant quotation from historian David Apter who wrote in 1972 that, "At a rally on a Sunday, Nkrumah may damn the 'imperialists' but on Monday he sits down to work with them in the sleek modern offices of the secretariat." (48) This is emphasize that not only did the political and economic components of colonial rule carry over to the post-colonial moment, so too did the foundational racial hierarchy. Thus, when Pierre, and later I, traveled to contemporary Ghana the lingering remnants of this post-colonial compromise were tangibly evident. Pierre makes an important move, one that is also reflected in my chapter on Ghana, by discussing the interactions between Ghanaians and people of African descent from the diaspora *beyond* the locus of the slave-

¹⁸ Pierra, Jemima. "'You Are Rich Because You Are White' Marking Race and Signifying Whiteness." *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2012. 68-70. Print.

castle-dungeons and the related discourse of slavery—while not denying the significance of either. Pierre also notes how the ‘trope’ of whiteness, and white supremacy, are contemporarily reproduced in Ghana through not only cultural factors such as Christianity in which “White Jesus billboards in Ghana...resonated with broader associations of Whiteness with divinity, morality, and ethical goodness,” (76) but also in language. *Obruni*—a term that means literally “foreigner”—signals for Pierre, a “thoroughly racialized discourse in Ghana...about Whiteness” that is sometimes “used as an indicator of goodness or attractiveness” (76). The cultural saturation of the discourse surrounding whiteness in Ghana is exemplary of the “normalizing effects of White discourse imbued as it is with representations that continuously construct and affirm a racialized hierarchy that permeates society” (76-77). My chapter on Ghana provides a further illustration, and is in conversation with, one of Pierre’s central arguments:

Whiteness is upheld and consolidated by the consistent and structurally elevated position of White bodies in the local terrain [...] Ghana’s White population seems to be predominately made up of officially recognized “experts”—affiliated with donor agencies and international nongovernmental organizations, missionary efforts, Peace Corps and other volunteer groups, and academic institutions... (78)

Research Questions

The central question within my project concerns the roles movement—particularly travel abroad—plays in establishing human connections or relationships across boundaries of difference. Underlying my central question on movement and the formation of human connections across difference are several other questions that I will attend to within my chapters. These questions include:

How are connections or relationships formed between human beings who possess very different identities, whether language, nationality, sexuality, or race despite a shared history of enslavement or colonialism? What does Pan-Africanism look like on the scale of the individual, beneath the level of political ideology? Is Pan-Africanism a form of racial solidarity, or does it more so exist along lines of nationalism and interconnected sociopolitical histories and contemporary realities? Is Pan-Africanism an alternative to forms of identity based upon nationality, or does nationality fit within; in other words is Pan-Africanism trans-national or inter-national?

What is it about movement and writing about the experience of traveling that allowed writers—such as James Baldwin, Vincent Carter, and Frank Wilderson III—to better understand the self, one's original home, the place of travel, and systems of racial discrimination such as Jim Crow in the United States, or colonialism on the continent?

Can writing my own travel nonfiction essays help me better understand the self, the home, and sociopolitical conditions, as demonstrated by historical Black activists and writers? What possibilities for transgressions exist beyond literal departure?

Can African-American car and music culture, particularly in regard to hip-hop, be seen as a mode of escaping the post-industrial city? What are the problematics involved in theorizing escaping without leaving and potentially 'valorizing' or celebrating particular forms of consumption?

Hypothesis Dislocation, (Fugitive) Movements, & Imagination

For activists and writers throughout the Pan-African world, being located outside one's home, outside the objects of one's creative or political understandings—whether in time, space and location, culture, or language—has been central to understanding the subjective self, the sociopolitical and economic components of one's home or region, and the realities and experiences of other human beings throughout the Pan-African world.¹⁹ This renewed, tripartite, understanding acquired during the experiences of movement is possible because writers and activists have oscillated between home and abroad, the self and other and arrived at renewed artistic and political understandings that they then expressed through writing. In fostering diasporic connections and solidarities, human movement, dislocation, and relocation, in forms from the literary, to geographic, from the political to the social, has been what Black feminist Audre Lorde describes, in *Sister Outsider*, as:

“Creative energy [and] knowledge [that] empowers us, [and] becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence.”

The creative energy cultivated during the time of travel—whether in the form of ‘righteous’ anger or relief that one is finally free of the United States—and the critical distance that movement (travel) offers are the ingredients writers need to envision and dream of radical, novel possibilities for being and connecting in the world.

¹⁹ This formulation is inspired by M.M Bakhtin who adds, “For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are others. In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding.”

Bakhtin, M. M., and Michael Holquist. "Response to a Question from Novy Mir." *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas, 1986. 7. Print.

Justification

And what had happened to hope and love in our politics? ... How do we produce a vision that enables us to see beyond our immediate ordeals? How do we transcend bitterness and cynicism and embrace love, hope, and an all-encompassing dream of freedom, especially in these rough times?²⁰

Blackness—not individual Black people, but that sociopolitical, economic historical-future oriented improvisational, yet studied force, is a way of being in the world that spans time and space, cultures and languages. Like so many aspects of human life, Blackness began with movement: Movement across continents and across seas, movement across bodies, lives and deaths, ideas, and language, movement through time and through space. The very context in which we are situated, Pan-Africanism, was born through movement, a movement that sought to forge community and resistance out of the violence and dehumanization of enslavement and colonialism, a movement that sought to unite lives that existed in similar conditions but on different continents. Of course, movement begins prior to Blackness, for dynamism is the central component of life: life is movement and movement is life. But to engage movement within the context of Blackness, in which it oscillates between life and death, between violence and retribution, between brutal separation and discovery, is to ground one's self in a context that speaks to the realities of modern human life. We exist in a moment of flux and instability where change happens quickly and everything is complex. We exist in a moment where politics and economics are still violent and destructive, a moment that is still shaped by the recent histories of colonialism, imperialism, and enslavement and earth-scorching globalization, a moment in which humanity is still deeply divided. We exist in a moment where it seems that we forget that life matters and that peace was once our ultimate goal. Engaging movement, through the lens of Blackness, allows one to approach our complex contemporary moment with a grasp on the history from which we arrived, to pay attention to the inequalities that still persist and the sociopolitical work that still needs to be done.

It was while I was in Ghana, riding in the back of a tro-tro taxi that I arrived at how a focus on movement allows a focus on the living-ness of life, both human and non-human. A focus on movement is a focus on how things changes, are sometimes uneven, fluctuate and decrease, how things exist in multiplicities with immense diversity throughout, on how things are sometimes

²⁰ Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon, 2002. Print.

difficult and other times easy. Movement illuminates the physicality and materiality of life, on how we breathe and perspire and interact with the various worlds in which we exist. A focus on movement permits rich theoretical analysis as it crosses disciplinary boundaries and philosophical paradigms. It is my hope to encapsulate some of the various dimensions of movements in moments and thoughts composed of words.

There are five contemporary scholarly endeavors in literary and cultural studies that mirror and inspire the project undertaken within this thesis: Gary Younge's (2002) *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey through the American South*; Magdalena J. Zaborowska's (2008) *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*; Randall Kenan's (1999) *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*; Ernest Dunbar's (1968) edited collection of interviews *The Black Expatriates: A Study of American Negroes in Exile*; and Philippe Wamba's (1999) *Kinship: A Family's Journey in Africa and America*.²¹

Gary Younge, a Black British journalist, left England in 1997 for a trip throughout the American South that roughly followed the routes taken by the Freedom Riders in the 1960s. In America Younge found he was an outsider with a unique perspective as the son of immigrants from Barbados. Born and raised in England, he was attracted to various manifestations of Black culture, in particular, the transnational connections between him and his family and other peoples of African descent around the world. *No Place Like Home* is a mix of genres: partly a travelogue, partly an exercise in history and cultural studies based around Younge's sardonic account of the trials and tribulations traveling on the Greyhound bus as he learns about himself and his culture.

Margdalena Zaborowska's work on James Baldwin's decade (1961-1971) in Turkey is a fascinating engagement with both critical literary studies and primary research in Turkey where she traveled to and interviewed Baldwin's friends and acquaintances and collected archival materials, such as never-

²¹ Dunbar, Earnest. *The Black Expatriates : A Study of American Negroes in Exile*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1968. Print.
Kenan, Randall. *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Knopf, 1999. Print.
Wamba, Philippe E. *Kinship: A Family's Journey in Africa and America*. New York: Dutton, 1999. Print.
Younge, Gary. *No Place like Home: A Black Briton's Journey through the American South*. Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi, 2002. Print.
Zaborowska, Magdalena J. *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. Print.

before-published photographs. Zaborowska's works to decenter Baldwin from Harlem and Paris and open our readings of his works to alternative locations from which to view his "personal anguish and prophetic intellectual integrity as these provide better distance from which to see his American roots." Zaborowska's work reminds us that the transatlantic Black writers and artists who seemed to move fluidly, did so with their "psychological and spiritual scars" still intact.

Ernest Dunbar's 1968 edited collection was inspired by the author's own travels to Moscow, where he "bumped into another American Negro" (11). Dunbar addresses anyone who may be skeptical of a study focused exclusively on Black American expatriates, writing, essentially, 'why would anyone care about the Negro'? "If you are not a Negro, you may ask what is so important about the experience of a Negro expatriate. Why should his sojourn in another country have different dimensions than that of the white American living abroad?" (12) His text includes several interviews with Black travelers, and Dunbar finds that "Some of the black Americans who move to foreign lands find that years of conditioning, the defensive maneuvers, the peculiar mechanisms of survival learned in America have proved impossible to discard...for them 'The Problem' has become internalized and every white face is still 'The Man'" (17).

Randall Kenan does not travel internationally but instead he travels across America, looking for a deeper understanding of what it means to be Black in America. In undertaking this he travels from Vermont to Maine, to California and the American South and Northwest. In Kenan's text his self is central, and the interviews are accessories as his narrative is first person throughout. He presents not a composition of the thoughts of others but his "personal history of the last five years." In drawing a conclusion from his travels and conversations, Kenan finds that there is no one element that defines the Black American, but instead an essential individuality.

The late Philippe Wamba included an epigraph from James Baldwin on the 'three hundred year gulf' that exists between the Negro and the African, which is a keen beginning to Wamba's "chronicle [of] a journey that spans history and crisscrosses an ocean...a circular journey from an inherited expectation of racial affinity, through often troubling experiences that challenged this conviction, to

a reaffirmed appreciation of the indelible historical and cultural ties that bind black people on either side of the gaping Atlantic” (1). Reminiscent of James Baldwin, Wamba conveys a certain skepticism of the supposed ‘given-ness’ of racial affinities: he was raised an ocean away by an African-American mother and a Congolese father, and his book moves through history and sociopolitics that relate to not only the history of colonialism and enslavement but other events that precipitated transnationalism, from the two World Wars to diasporic music, such as American “rappers [who] even traveled to Africa on pan-African missions of self-education and brotherhood.” Wamba makes small but very important connections between himself and the history of Blackness in statements such as: “music has helped to sustain me throughout my life, as it has for millions of black people throughout history” (285).

This project is similar to all of these works in its focus on transnational linkages between people of Africa descent, its focus on the travels of literary artists, and its engagement with cultural and historical studies. This project is unique in that it brings three locales not often connected into conversation with each other—Amsterdam, Ghana, and Detroit—as well its philosophical underpinning in drawing on ideas from existentialism and phenomenology, cultural geography, and Black critical theory. This work can be seen as an exercise in “theorizing” or “philosophizing” in that it moves through historical-cultural studies to tie together various, seemingly discrete aspects of the contemporary world. A critically sustained engagement with (fugitive) movement cannot neglect what lies opposite to it: captivity, blockages, and non-escapes. Residing in history, this project awakens and brings together figures such as the ‘fugitive slave’ and the ‘escaped convict’—both of which were found ‘guilty’ by an unjust juridical system—as a vocabulary, as keywords, which can be used to understand the traveling Black writer or the tourist looking for an escape. Drawing these connections lodges us firmly onto the global foundation of problematic socioeconomic conditions and racial violence—conditions that continue to connect people of African descent throughout the world regardless of cultural or racial affinities.

Theoretical Frameworks

In this section I will discuss my two theoretical frameworks:

1. Fugitivity and the Black Radical Tradition
2. Non-Representational Theory

The Possibilities for Escape: Fugitivity and the Black Radical Tradition

... The projects of “fugitive planning and Black study” are mostly about reaching out to find connection; they are about making common cause with the brokenness of being, a brokenness, I would venture to say, that is also Blackness, that remains Blackness, ...

The movement of things can be felt and touched and exist in language and in fantasy, it is flight, it is motion, it is fugitivity itself. Fugitivity is not only escape... It is a being in motion that has learned that “organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves” ... and that there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned.²²

Jack Halberstam

As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have noted, Black fugitivity is a key component of the Black radical tradition. The figure of fugitivity traces back to poet and literary scholar, Nathaniel Mackey, who noted how fugitivity has a “resonant relationship to enslavement and persecution”.²³ Fugitivity includes Black practices for evading and avoiding white supremacy, and Moten argues that it is the primary mode of Black freedom. Fugitivity is a complex, historically informed trope and thematic that connotes a sense of ambiguous wandering and clandestine evasion, an undertaking of a precarious sense of being in the world in the pursuit of freedom. As Nathaniel Mackey describes through the character N in his 1986 book, *Bedouin Hornbook*, fugitivity is a strategy for trespassing, writing “I confess to a weakness for these amphibious, in-between, both/and advances into a realm which defies categorization, this way of trespassing, so to speak, the line which otherwise divides melody from rhythm, horn from drum and so forth” (138).²⁴ Fugitivity, then, is a means of leaving

²² Halberstam, Jack. Introduction. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. By Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Minor Compositions. Print.

²³ Mackey, Nathaniel. “Cante Moro.” *Disembodied Poetics: Annals of the Jack Kerouac School*. Anne Waldman and Andrew Schelling. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico, 1994. 71. Print.

²⁴ Mackey, Nathaniel. *Bedouin Hornbook*. Lexington: U of Kentucky, 1986. Print.

the confines of a single category in favor of the space that lies between categories, a space that may seem to be neither here nor there, one that permits an escape from the binary. Fugitivity is connected to the history of the runaway slave, Maroon societies and the Underground Railroad, the origins of the Black radical tradition.

The figure of fugitivity connects to the criminalization of Blackness and Black agency under slave codes legislated during the formation of the United States. American citizenship was conceptualized in opposition to the figure of the Black fugitive running away from acts criminalized as treason, felony, and escape from slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment (1868) worked to abolish the necessity for Black fugitivity by granting Black people the “immunities and privileges” of citizenship. Such a feat proved difficult to realize, however, in a context of anti-Black racism and political-economic discrimination. Thus, even after the abolishment of enslavement, there was an onslaught of “race conscious laws, discriminatory punishments, and new forms of everyday surveillance”²⁵ that reified any Black person who crossed one of the multiple lines of racial norms as Black criminality. Crossing the lines of racial norms in an acknowledgement of one’s agency and humanity was both to risk violence and death and to transgress white supremacy and illuminate its precarious state. This is partially why Fred Moten advances the notion of “stolen life” to describe Blackness as a “fugitive movement” of “the stolen” in and out of the law of slavery. Moten characterizes “stolen life” as an “originally criminal refusal of the interplay of framing and grasping [and] taking and keeping” as well as a “reluctance that disrupts” these practices. Stolen life grounds the Black radical tradition. Moten does not contest the ‘criminality’ of Blackness, but re-envision it “as a cause for optimism,” as he aligns fugitive movement with the possibility for freedom.²⁶

Moten’s description of fugitivity as “a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed”²⁷ takes on a critical meaning when considered within the historical context of Black life in America. What are the states and conditions of the proper and the proposed for the Black subject? I see them as a state of immobility and confinement to segregated space, a condition

²⁵ Kalil Muhammad in *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern America* 18

²⁶ Marshall, Stephen. "The Political Life of Fugibility." *Theory & Event* 15.3 (2012).

²⁷ Feldman, Keith. "'fuga'." *Postmodern Culture* 18.3 (2008) Print.

of object-hood and inferior (in) humanity, and an estrangement from community with a lack of truer knowledge of self that exists beyond the meanings ascribed by whiteness. To transgress the proper is to transgress the limited state of being permitted to Blackness in pursuit of self-realization. Fugitive movement is an act of transgression that runs through the “history of Blackness [which is] a testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.”²⁸

In the latter half of Stefano Harney’s essay “Abolition and the General Intellect”, he reflects on some of the paradoxes of fugitivity and freedom in a section called “Exodus”, writing,

This tension of fugitivity and freedom under empire helps to make productive other aspects of the problematic of empire, the controversial claim that there is no outside to empire, and related strategy of exodus. The notion of an exodus from capitalist relations [...] seems to be difficult to think against the idea that empire has no outside. [...] The practice of fugitivity, the escape that goes nowhere but remains escape, is a key theme in the Black radical tradition.

Here, Harney references Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s controversial claim that “Empire has no centre and no outside” from their complex book *Empire*.²⁹ In *Empire* Hardt and Negri argue that even though nation-states-based systems of power are dismantling as a condition of world capitalism, one should not understand globalization as simply the de-regulation of markets. Instead, they see regulations as proliferating and forming an “acephalous supranational order,” which they call Empire, “a diffuse, anonymous network of all-englobing power”. The “sinews” of this “phantasmic polity”—its flows of people, information, and wealth—are too disorderly to be monitored from a single metropolitan center.³⁰ As Harney notes, if there is no outside to Empire and no center from which it springs, how does one fugitively transgress empire? That is, can one escape from capitalist relations? By bringing in the Black radical tradition, Harney makes an interesting comment on the “escape that goes nowhere,” which is perhaps an escape that does not ultimately find solace from capitalist relations but still manages to venture toward its outside, in discovering a place in which one can live and connect outside the proper and proposed. This is why Jack Halberstam emphasizes that fugitivity is not escape but a “being in motion” that acknowledges

²⁸ Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2003. Print.

²⁹ Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.

³⁰ see Gopal Balakrishnan on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. in the *New Left Review*” October 2000

the existence of other possibilities for being and organizing outside the conditions of Empire. What do these other possibilities look like? Are they cultural practices, artistic, political, or an amorphous flow between art and politics? In exploring acts of fugitivity in the form of travel and movement, it will be important to note how Black American writers re-envision new possibilities for being in the world. Working with the figure of fugitivity in the Black radical tradition helps one recognize that exodus and transgression are not only responses to the conditions of race in America but also the conditions of capitalistic relations and criminality and persecution.

Writing in a state of radical, fugitivity allows one to write against the relations of power imposed by the dominant, sanctioned use of language. In doing so, one creates a space of defiant composition. This is why Hardt and Negri's absolute statement that there is no "outside to Empire" is so controversial: it forecloses the possibilities of human beings envisioning and creating an outside. The seemingly non-existence of the outside of empire and capitalistic relations does not entail the impossibility of its existence. As Jack Halberstam writes, "We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming" (6 *The Undercommons*). Even if the creation of that outside remains unfinished, the journey toward its creation, the very attempt of envisioning something new, is worthwhile. Thus, Black fugitivity is far from simply running away and renouncing political activity or the real, material world. Instead, as Michelle Koerner writes, "To run in a captive society entails an absolute defiance in the face of those mechanisms that seek to "imprison life".³¹

Michelle Koerner's article regards Deleuze's references of George Jackson, a Black American male who wrote poignant letters from 1964 to 1970 while in the Soledad Prison. In a letter dated June 10, 1970, Jackson writes of a sense of constant movement and how he eventually succumbed to a deep-seated fear he had constantly run away from, as seen in the following excerpt:

³¹ Koerner, Michelle. "Lines of Escape: Gilles Deleuze's Encounter with George Jackson." *Genre* 44.2 (2011): 157-80. Web.

Being captured was the first of my fears. It may have been inborn. It may have been an acquired characteristic built up over the centuries of Black bondage. It is the thing I've been running from all my life.³²

Jackson emphasizes that the messages in his letters are “from the hunted running Blacks to those people of this society who profess to want to change the conditions that destroy life.” Jackson’s letters provide a stark reminder of the strenuousness of Black fugitivity, that it can be a constant state of being in motion as one is continually evading capture and death. Even though Black fugitivity is a being toward freedom, it fits alongside the states of anxiety, restlessness, and unsettledness that characterizes much of the contemporary human condition, provoking the question, can the Black subject ever stop running (moving)? What George Jackson’s letters further illustrate is that even in his state of capture there were still possibilities for movement and the envisagement for escape, as Deleuze and Guattari accentuate, writing, “All social systems present lines of escape; and just as well hardenings that block the escapes.” Prison writings provide unique material for thinking about being-toward-freedom and creating avenues for escape, as Michael Hames-Garcia argues in *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*. Hames-Garcia forwards that imprisoned writers challenge notions of freedom as “autonomy, absence of restraint, or formal equality” and envision freedom as the “inter-dependence of connected individuals” and that the struggle for other’s freedom is a “pre-condition of one’s own” (96), making a contradistinction with normative liberal individualism.³³

“We ain’t going nowhere, but got suits and cases.”³⁴

³² Jackson, George. *Soledad Brother; the Prison Letters of George Jackson*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1970. Print.

³³ Hames-Garcia, Michael Roy. *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2004. Print.

³⁴ Kanye West “Jesus Walks” (Song)

Non-Representational Theory and the “Leitmotif Of Movement”

Thus, to begin with, it would be possible to argue that human life is based on and in movement...movement captures the animic flux of life...³⁵

Non-representational theory often seems to be a return to the bare levels of the human body and its neurological and physiological capacities to affect and be affected by humans and non-humans alike. Objects, landscapes, sentiments, corporations, the politically powerful, and mediated images and discourses can affect human beings on psychophysical levels in a type of relational materiality. Further, human beings can be affected by these various entities without even being conscious of it. Nigel Thrift exposes the limits of the subject's consciousness, before engaging the pre-cognitive, the “rolling mass of nerve volleys [that] prepare the body for action ...before the conscious self is even aware of them (7). Non-representational theory emerged not only from post-structuralist thinking but also post-phenomenology and is indebted to thinkers from multiple traditions in its focus on the “practical and processural fluidity of things” (97 Cresswell). Movement, the “leitmotif” of non-representational theory, is an advantageous theoretical concern: its multidimensionality straddles, like affects, the biological, the mechanical and engineered as well as the inter-connected, relational aspects of life.

Non-representational theorists assert that all human life is based on and in movement and that this movement captures the joy of living and a view of life as potential.³⁶ The activities of life are seen as constantly moving and changing. Non-representational theory views things and the spaces in which they exist as an assemblage. The notion of assemblage as a way of thinking about the social world comes from Deleuze, who argues that there does not exist a fixed and stable ontology for the social world that proceeds from “atoms” to “molecules” to “materials”. Instead, social formations are *assemblages* of other complex configurations that can be described as mosaics, patchworks, heterogeneous, fluid, transitory configurations. Levi Bryant provides a further description of

³⁵ Thrift, N. J. "Life Not as We Know It." *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008. 5. Print.

³⁶ Non-Representational Approaches to Body–Landscape Relations in Geography Compass 4/1 (2010): Hannah Macpherson

Deleuze's notion of assemblages, writing,

Assemblages are composed of heterogeneous elements or objects that enter into relations with one another. These objects are not all of the same type. Thus you have physical objects, happenings, events, and so on, but you also have signs, utterances, and so on.³⁷

Non-representational theory is not necessarily “anti” representation,³⁸ and it does not deny that representation remains significant but wants one to consider how representation can be seen as a type of presentation, a performance. Hayden Lorimer proposes that “more-than-representation” would be a more apt title for the theoretical position, for in non-representational theory,

The focus falls on how life takes shapes and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges...³⁹

Being more-than-representation involves recognizing that representation and text only inadequately commemorates ordinary lives since it values what is written or spoken over multisensual practices and experiences.⁴⁰

Non-representational theory wants to move away from thinking of the body as static, socially constructed, and individualized and instead toward thinking of the body as something that is constantly in process, a reserve of “biological impulses and cultural-neurological habits” that takes shapes through its interactions with “other objects, bodies, and landscapes.” As Latour writes (2004) “to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning “effectuated”, moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans.”⁴¹ In thinking about landscapes—the visual features of an area of land including its physical, living, and human elements and the different forms of land-use such as buildings and structures as well as weather conditions—non-representational theory urges one not

³⁷ <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2009/10/08/deleuze-on-assemblages/>

³⁸ Stuart Hall describes representation as the way in which meaning is given to depict images and words, which stand for something else (Hall). Similarly, Hall concludes “representation has no fixed meaning until it has been represented” (Hall).

³⁹ H. Lorimer (2005). Cultural Geography: the busyness of being ‘more-than-representational’ *Progress in Human Geography* 29 (1) pp 83-94

⁴⁰ Nash, C. (2000). “Performativity in practice: some recent work in cultural geography.” *Progress in Human Geography* 24(4): 655

⁴¹ Latour, B. (2004) How to talk about the body? The normative dimensions of science studies. *Body and Society* 10 (2-3), p. 205-229

to take a landscape's current condition as the only possibility for what that landscape could be but instead to remain open to what Rose calls "dreams of presence", which include "dreams of who we are, of where we belong and of how we get on with life". "Dreams of presence" are the means to "hold onto the worlds that always excludes our grasp."⁴² Taking into account the relationship between the body and landscape, Lorimer suggests that one sees both as contingent on the other in a constantly occurring process of becoming, as landscape is "contingent upon the bodies that move across it and then [landscape] gives shape to those embodied subjects." Non-representational theory also stresses the importance of recognizing affects and sensations, as they can be the means of re-envisioning politics and the possibilities of change through affective feelings such as hope or anger. Further is the emphasis on a type of ethical sense of novelty drawn from the "interstices of interaction" on which it may be possible to "build new forms of life in which 'strangeness itself [is] the locus of new forms of neighborliness and community'"⁴³

Non-representational theory leads one to consider how inter-relational embodied experiences of moving through space are of body and mind. One's body controls and delineates that movement and determines whether movement is turgid and difficult or brisk. One's body responds not only to external stimuli, such as the temperature or the amount of visibility, but also responds to affects that are mediated, controlled, and that take place at the preconscious level that then shapes one's visible movements and choices. One's mind quickly processes the space one is moving through and allows one to respond accordingly to challenges and circumstances as they appear and disappear. The mind and the body work in tandem during the process of movement, to the point where they can almost become indecipherable from one another. Sight, for instance, can seemingly be reduced to a wholly physiological phenomenon. Yet sight remains equally inseparable from the philosophical, cultural, and sociopolitical dimensions that permeate and alter the physical acts of seeing and knowing. When one is moving, the boundaries between the mind and the body begin to dissipate, or, at least, flicker. The relationship between the physical and the subjective becomes almost seamless during this

⁴² Rose, M. (2006). Gathering 'dreams of presence': a project for the cultural landscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24, pp. 537–554.

⁴³ Santner 2001:6 in Thrift, N. J. "Life, but Not as We Know." *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008. 14. Print.

movement. The complexities of one's mind work in full force as one processes not only conscious thoughts, such as one's destination, but also the sub or preconscious control (motivation) of one's body to move toward that destination.

Finding Connections: Thinking about the Fugitive's Body

The body is not merely a vehicle for departing from social norms, for escaping from the structures of moral codes. It is, in its positive aspect, the grounds for configuring an alternative way of being that eludes the grasp (...). It is not a matter of resisting power but of dis-regarding it.⁴⁴

The figure of fugitivity in the Black radical tradition provides a conceptual vocabulary and historical sociopolitical context in which to locate the various movements and travel that the literary artists considered in my project undertake. Particularly, fugitivity allows a focus on how the international travel of Black American literary artists is not simply an attempt at 'escape' but of 'criminal transgression' across the proper and proposed norms of racialized being. These acts of transgression catalyzed Black literary artists' composition of a re-envisioned world and state of being in which connections with human beings across boundaries of difference were possible.

Non-representational theory allows us to consider a different, but connected set of phenomena. First, non-representational theory allows a focus on the fluidity and processural nature of life, on how life and human beings are always in a state of becoming. Recognizing the moving lived-ness of life allows one to recognize that an alternative world is possible and exists beyond the ways of existing sanctioned by capitalistic relations. Further, non-representational theory urges us to consider how, in the acts of movements and travel, Black American literary artists had various forces acting upon them. Not only the inter-subjective presence of other people, but how the various components of the landscape acted on their beings, and aided, or perhaps impeded, them in arriving at a renewed understanding of the self, the home, and the other.

The theoretical frameworks of fugitivity and the Black radical tradition and non-representational theory urge us to recognize how there is more to life than is often admitted. Both frameworks emphasize the possibilities for life to exist beyond our normative boundaries and meanings and how life is about relationships and encounters. Both frameworks illuminate how life is in a constant of state of movement and how human beings with physical, feeling, and affected bodies fit into the ecologies and assemblages of life's movements. In this state of constant of movement lies the

⁴⁴ Pau Obrador-Pons "Being on Holiday" (55) in *Tourism Studies* 2003 3:47

possibility for change, perhaps not total freedom or the arrival of the ideal world, but the exposure that something more, something different and hopefully better—the wild, Maroon beyond—can exist in the “spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Halberstam, Jack. Introduction. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. By Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Minor Compositions. (11) Print.

Methodologies

This project is based around three field experiences in Amsterdam, Ghana, and Detroit in addition to scholarly research and analysis. In Amsterdam I traveled to the Bijlmermeer neighborhood, where a large population of Dutch Caribbean people live, as well as to Amsterdam Centraal. My travels to Amsterdam worked alongside my literary engagement with the novel *Haarlem* by Heather Neff, the musical *Passing Strange*, and the nonfiction writings of James Baldwin and Vincent Carter. My time in Ghana was based around my position with the Cheerful Hearts Foundation, a local non-governmental organization (NGO) on the ‘child labor project’ in which we addressed issues surrounding child labor and education in the very poor fishing communities surrounding Kasoa–Fetteh, Senya Beraku, and Nyanyano. In Ghana I prepared notes and journaling that worked toward phenomenological immersion writing. Similar to travel writing, immersion writing involved using my personal experiences in Ghana as a source of research. My immersion notes worked to convey what “it felt like” alongside “what happened.” Paying attention to description, my journals explored, through my subjectivity, the relationships, interactions, and experiences between persons and situations. In Detroit I undertook a similar journaling process while volunteering with another international NGO *buildOn* in which I worked with high-school students from Detroit toward the cultivation of personal development and leadership skills. My experiences in all three locations involved using my body as an ‘instrument of research’ (Longhurst *et al.* 2008) as I reflected on how I came to know the various place *experientially* while capturing the interactions and interconnections between bodies and space and bodies and objects. I also conducted interviews, both formal and informal, while traveling, particularly with Dr. Heather Neff regarding how her time living in Europe as a Black American woman inspired her writing and understanding of the world and self, and with my colleagues in Ghana on their experiences forging transnational relationships.

Operative Definitions

Movement

John Urry's book *Mobilities*⁴⁶ provides a strong conceptual grounding on which to define the operative definition of movement. Urry's central premise is that contemporary society is organized around practices that entail various forms of movement of people, ideas, information, and objects as opposed to a static set of relations, structures, and institutions. Urry finds that the mobility turn can connect "the analysis of different forms of travel, transport and communications with the multiple ways in which economic and social life is performed and organized through time and various spaces" (6). Urry explains some of the various theoretical frameworks that are centered on mobilities including fluidity and nomadism, migrations and diasporas. Further, Urry introduces five different forms of travel that are the core aspects of the mobilities paradigm: 1) Corporeal travel, which includes the movement of people "for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration and escape," 2) The physical movement of objects involved in the industrial production and distribution of things, 3) Imaginative travel, which regards the ways in which we 'move' across time and space through print and visual media, 4) Communicative travel, which is represented by the ability to exchange messages, and 5) Virtual travel, which pertains to the "powerful, interdependent knowledge-based systems that organize production, consumption, travel and communications around the world."

Taking into account the mobilities paradigm, I take movement as dynamism, as encounters, becomings, unfoldings, happenings, slips, passages, interruptions, repetitions, insertions, subtleties, etc. In delineating my understanding of movement, I want to draw on the language of music to describe the varieties of movements that I encountered within my fieldwork. Music is movement, and movement is music. There is no sound without movement, no rhythm, no change. Movement, in all its fluctuations, changes in tempo, key, and volume are all shifts in how music swells and shrinks. Music is multiplicities. Music not only impacts our consciousness but impacts us as physical beings, moving inside and outside our bodies and shifting our very physiological and psychological processes: it can increase our heartbeats, soothe our fears, it can make us sweat, and increase our connections to strangers. It can redefine a space and open our consciousness to new ways of

⁴⁶ Urry, John. *Mobilities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007. Print.

understanding the world. Music is movement and movement is music, it is life. Music, like movement is rarely atonal; it rarely moves in a single, straight, uninterrupted line.

Travel

Travel is almost synonymous with movement, and one can become hard pressed to uncover the difference between when one is traveling and is simply moving. In my project, however, I take travel as a passage across national boundaries in which one enters a new context that possesses different beings and ways of being. Several Black Americans writers, including James Baldwin and Richard Wright, have reflected on how traveling allowed them to better understand America, themselves, and the connection between Black Americans and the African diaspora throughout the world. Thus, in the act of travel, the main concern of the traveler is not the place of travel but his or her internal self and the place he or she call home. It was in Europe, for example, that James Baldwin reflected on American democracy and culture. It was in Europe that James Baldwin acquired the critical distance that was necessary to acquire such renewed understandings.

Summary of Chapters

The first chapter, **Three Black Men in Europe**, focuses on the non-fiction writings of James Baldwin, Vincent Carter, and Richard Wright composed while living abroad in the 1950s. This chapter is grounded in existential philosophy, particularly the work of Albert Camus. The second chapter travels to **Amsterdam** and works to sketch a narrative that is centered on the *discordant* experiences of post-colonial Black migrants to the Netherlands and Black American tourists to the Netherlands. The principal literature engaged includes Anton de Kom's *We Slaves of Suriname*, Heather Neff's *Haarlem*, and Stew's musical *Passing Strange*. The third chapter is focused on my experiences volunteering in Kasoa, **Ghana** and is composed entirely of my travel writing. The fourth chapter is based around my return to **Detroit** from Ghana. I engage the problematics of the post-industrial city and the transformative dimensions of riding in the car listening to music, while working through relevant literature from non-representational theory, Black critical theory, and debates surrounding consumer culture and mobility. The **Conclusion** summarizes the main ideas posed in the four body chapters and the theoretical frameworks of fugitivity and non-representational theory.

Chapter 1: Three Black Men in Europe

1950s

This chapter focuses on James Baldwin's *Paris Essays*; Vincent Carter's *The Bern Book*; and Richard Wright's *Pagan Spain*.

What is the fugitive but a rebel?

Opening Notes:

This section focuses on select non-fiction writings of three Black American male writers traveling in Europe during the 1950s: James Baldwin's *Paris Essays*; Vincent Carter's experimental autobiography *The Bern Book* which was based on living in Bern, Switzerland from 1953-1957; and Richard Wright's *Pagan Spain* which was based on three month-long trips he took to the country in 1954 and 1955. In analyzing and discussing these writings, this section focuses on the complexities of travel and of establishing connections and relationships across boundaries of difference in order to arrive at renewed understandings of the *self*, the *home*, and the *other*. In engaging these writings, politics are not the central focus. While one cannot escape politics—as antagonistic race relations, colonialism, and the Cold War that shaped the 1950s figure heavily into the writings of all three authors—Baldwin, Carter, and Wright further illustrate that emotion played a large role in their departure from the United States and their experiences abroad. Anxiety, self-consciousness, anger, and fear, are some of the emotions that these writers carried with them while traveling. This illustrates that Blackness and the problem of race were not just political matters, but issues that affected the emotional well-being of racialized individuals. Baldwin was on the brink of suicide before he left the United States. Carter, tired of the 'superficial life' in America, found himself continually wrought with anxiety and depression as he traveled, alone, in Europe, unable to escape the ghost of the "Negro". In engaging their writings, it becomes clear that existential questions of truth, the meaning of life, a search for self-meaning beyond one's physical appearance, and the role of religion were deeply considered by the writers. Of course, it is well known that Baldwin and Wright engaged with French intellectuals, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, while living in Paris, and Carter's book is filled with mention of philosophers, including Spinoza, and he privileges self-reflection, reflection on truth and the meaning of life in his narrative.

To connect all three authors beyond their shared experience traveling in Europe during the 1950s, one could draw on the Algerian French writer and intellectual Albert Camus's ideas on rebellion. In his book-length essay *The Rebel*, Camus provides a theoretical overview of the sociopolitical climate in which these writers were working. Camus finds that in the post-World War II world, actual freedom had not increased as rapidly as man's awareness of it. That is, although the theoretical ideas of freedom and democracy were deployed in full force after World War II and

especially so during the Cold War, the actual conditions of humans throughout the world, in the United States and Europe, and Africa and Asia remained largely un-free. Camus finds that rebellion is the act of an educated man who is aware of his denied rights. He writes—almost as if he was aware of the experiences of Baldwin and Carter—that when the theoretical slave becomes tired of his condition and refuses to submit to the demands of the master, he is left with the choices of suicide and rebellion. We see Baldwin, Carter, and Wright choose a third alternative: not to submit, and not to remove their self from the world, but to flee, to depart, to seek out new ways of being in foreign places. Camus continues by noting that it is pivotal for the progressive, rebellious mind to recognize that his experience of suffering is not isolated, or abnormal but is a collective experience, that all men are suffering. In the realization of the collective nature of suffering and a lack of freedom, one rebels in solitude but progresses towards solidarity with human beings in similar situations.

As Camus noted in his Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech, the writer is obliged not to keep himself apart but to submit himself to the most humble and universal truth—he is like the others. With this understanding the writer can become a witness on behalf of “concrete, living, powerless human beings” a role in which one works not to judge but to understand. In Baldwin, Carter, and Wright we can see how in the act of rebellion, in the act of flight and departure towards freedom, each arrives at the realization that their experiences of suffering, their experiences with alienation, with struggling with a lack of understanding of the world and the self, is not an isolated experience, but a human one, especially in the midst of totalitarianism that shaped the 20th century.

This is why Camus writes, “I rebel therefore *we* are” as we analyze how these writers were transformed through their exposure to the claims and experiences of others.

Summary of Chapter Sections

Part 1: James Baldwin (Reflections on *Home*)

Captivity does not have to be a literal enclosure, a physical box, a cell, or chain wrapped around one's ankle. Captivity can be ideological — immaterial and intangible. In the first section of this chapter we begin by turning to James Baldwin's nonfiction essays through which we consider how racism is a state of captivity in which one is estranged not only from the racialized Other but also one's racialized Self. Baldwin's fugitivity, then, is in his attempt to construct an escape, literarily and politically, from the problematic categorizations of racial and national identities that keep human beings antagonistically estranged from each other. Thinking of fugitive Black travel as a type of being-toward-freedom, this section explores Baldwin's conceptualizations of freedom and salvation, terms which appear to be analogous, to help us explicate where that *being* is heading; that is, what *type* of freedom is one attempting to make possible through travel? It is not just a freedom from racial discrimination that is acquired by leaving the geographic boundaries of the United States, but leaving the United States, seemingly, provides both the Black and White American the freedom to become more human, to exist as more than Black or white. Fugitivity, then, is attempting to escape the violence of categorization. This section closes with an exploration of Baldwin while abroad looking back home at the peculiar situation of the Black American, a realization he arrives at through diasporic connections and encounters with writers and artists of African descent in Paris.

Part 2: Vincent Carter (Reflections on *Self*)

Philosopher Lewis Gordon describes how moving beyond a generalization, a type, a stereotype requires, "information that would transform [one] from a type into a unique individual..." the problem for the Blackened type, however, is that,

one does not *ask* a black; one concludes about him or her. The consequence is that one black is always superfluous, is always one black too many... In a world whose objective is to distance itself from blackness, any blackness is too much blackness for comfort.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Gordon, Lewis. "On the Borders of Anonymity and Superfluous Identity." *Cultural Dynamics* 12.2. 376-83. Web.

From Baldwin, we have the theory: (black) travel is, at least partially, an attempt at escaping the problem of racial discrimination in America as well as the violence of racial categorization and the resulting antagonism between the Self and the Other. In analyzing Vincent Carter's *The Bern Book* we see the futility, the failure, of this in its praxis as we begin considering anti-Blackness as a global phenomenon. Carter's initial attempt to escape Blackness by moving to Europe was unsuccessful as he was not only haunted by the ghosts, the after-lives, of slavery and the Holocaust, both of which were grounded on profound racism, he was constantly objectified, rendered a type without a voice, without the ability or agency to speak his individuality into existence. He found himself as he felt in America: isolated.

Considering Carter's work through Camus' notion of the absurd, this section places forefront the argument that from his failure to escape the problem of race. In his narrative, Carter begins to embrace a positive conception of Blackness, in a way reminiscent of Fanon, as he points out that it is *racism* that is absurd, not his Blackness as he begins to reject the stereotypes he had previously internalized, thus arriving at a renewed understanding of self.

Part 3: Richard Wright (Reflection on the *Other*)

When Harper & Brothers published Richard Wright's book *Pagan Spain* in 1957 it was not without controversy. The publisher advanced only three thousand copies for the book's release, and a month later only sold five hundred. With *Pagan Spain*, Wright attempted to move beyond a focus on racism in the United States onto the universality of victimization and totalitarianism amidst the Cold War. This section focuses on how Wright *sees* and understands the sociopolitical and cultural makings of Spain as he travels through the country conversing with the various people he encounters. Implicit in many of the critiques of the novel is a concern over the audacity of a Black writer to step outside of his immediate sociopolitical concerns—racism in the United States—and attempt to write about the cultural and political oppression of a European country that is, seemingly, entirely foreign to him. In engaging this, this section critiques arguably problematic readings of *Pagan Spain*. This section works broadly under bell hooks' notion that looking or gazing back, in this case at Europe, is an oppositional act of agency for the Black and/or colonized, dominated subject in which:

even in the worse circumstances of domination, to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency...⁴⁸

This section argues that Wright's work provokes important questions of the Black American interested in what lies beyond his or her geographical borders. Is the Black American required to step outside of the American imperial gaze that so often cloaks foreign affairs? Wright, in his critical writing on Spain, seems to mirror the mode of the Western traveler who looks disparagingly at the cultural and political ways of the place of travel. Or is the Black American so American that it is difficult to even imagine another way of looking? Is the Black American who looks abroad always looking with an oppositional gaze?

Chapter Conclusion:

Baldwin, Carter, and Wright attempted to articulate their feelings of alienation and estrangement, not in a strictly Marxist sense, but as conditions of racism in which they were not only cut off from full self-understanding because of stereotypes: they were cut off from the full possibilities of human relationships because of their Blackness. Attempting to alleviate the problem of race, each writer looks for connections: Baldwin articulates a uniquely alienated American identity that differs from both the European and the African. Carter employs respectability politics and his own intellectualism. Wright continues in his work of conceptualizing a transnational political solidarity against totalitarianism and oppression but encounters problems in abandoning the American gaze. It was in the process of travel that each of these writers was able to develop these techniques.

⁴⁸ hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End. 1992. 117. Print.

Part 1: James Baldwin's *Paris Essays*

The Fugitive Wants To Be Free. What is Freedom?

James Baldwin's idea of bringing freedom into being through loving and recognizing the humanity of the other gets to the center of the premise underlying this thesis project: how movement and fugitivity can allow one to develop connections across boundaries of difference, to forge relationships with and understandings of individuals who reside on the other side of a separating membrane, to locate the pores in that membrane and illuminate the spaces from which it perspires and breathes. Baldwin critiqued the human predilection for simple categories and false names, how easily "we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, [and] imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations".⁴⁹ The beauty of our lives is a human complexity that exceeds categories and false names. Yet, as Baldwin noted "condemnation is easier than wonder"⁵⁰ and the oppression of people that "life [be] neatly fitted into pegs" to the demise of the imagination, and a premature resolution with the demands and contradictions of history.⁵¹

In the 1982 "A Letter to Prisoners" Baldwin discusses the commonality shared by artists and prisoners: "both know what it means to be free".⁵² He proceeds to discuss how freedom is usually deployed as a trope of American nationalism, a 'callisthenic' exercise as Cold War Americans are "forever stitching flags, making and threatening and dropping bombs".⁵³ These exercises of 'freedom' are precisely what freedom is not, as Baldwin illustrates how moral and political ideas like 'freedom' and 'democracy' can be distorted and twisted by the arbiters of power and oppression and works to disconnect freedom from violent nationalism. Baldwin brings freedom to the individual,

⁴⁹ In "The Fire Next Time" in *Price of the Ticket*

⁵⁰ 203-204 *Uncollected Writings*

⁵¹ The essays referenced are collected in both:

Baldwin, James, and Randall Kenan. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York: Pantheon, 2010. Print.

Baldwin, James. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985. Print.

⁵² 213 in *UW*

⁵³ 212 in *UW*

human level, as it becomes a way of being and thinking of the world and one's humanity. Being compelled to know freedom comes as a result of having one's freedom "arbitrarily limited, or menaced" by another human power. Baldwin finds that "the rain, the snow, the thunder, or the earthquake, or death" do not cause the anguish that one feels when another human being limits one's freedoms, for "the thunder which deafens me or the water which drowns me is not a man like me, is not compelled to hear my cry or answer my plea".⁵⁴ In the human ability to hear another human's cry of anguish, Baldwin arrives at freedom: the "real recognition of, and respect for, the other and the condition of the other" as one realizes that the "other is oneself". For Baldwin, it is the ability to "love one another" that defines freedom, that brings freedom into being.⁵⁵

Captivity

It is estrangement from other human beings, estrangement from love that keeps us from being free, from allowing freedom to arrive. The freedom that Baldwin speaks of is not entirely literal, it is not a freedom caught up in laws and legal statuses, but a freedom from the identities and boundaries that keep us estranged from one another. As George Lamming's poetic title *In the Castle of My Skin* reminds us, our skin and our bodies can keep us in captivity, surround us, and estrange us from the other, blackness, whiteness, American-ness, and create islands around the self, islands that push away what is different.⁵⁶

Baldwin's notion of freedom works contrary to any understandings of freedom as autonomy, as an individual free of constraint and coercion from the institutions and structures that compose the world. For Baldwin, an individual is not free from constraint and coercion if that individual's way of being in the world is still determined by ideas such as racism, nationalism, and sexism, institutions and structures which prevent that individual from recognizing the other. One can only acquire the ability to love the other if one is, at least, *becoming* free of the ideas that impede love and

⁵⁴ 213 *UW*

⁵⁵ 213 *UW*

⁵⁶ Equally, a connotation of George Lamming's title could be how skin, even racialized skin, can provide a secure place of refuge, as one can be "secure in one's Blackness."

human connections. A discussion of the possibility of loving and seeing ‘oneself’ in the other emerges again in an essay dated the year Baldwin died, 1987, entitled “To Crush the Serpent”.

... The burning of the witch, the heretic, the Jew, the nigger, the faggot—have always failed to redeem, or even change in any way whatever, the mob. They merely epiphanize and force their connection...the charred bones connect its members and give them a reason to speak to one another, for the charred bones are the sum total of their individual self-hatred, externalized.⁵⁷

The self-hatred Baldwin speaks of is a result of the recognition of the commonality shared between oneself and the other, that one’s self *is* the hated other, and these rituals of violence are attempts to forge connections out of the repudiation of that hated other (self). The violence fails to exorcize or save and instead just leaves a “bloodstained self”. Baldwin’s passage illuminates the emptiness of a collective sense of identity that is forged over charred bones, the bones being a material reminder that what was thought to be extinguished still remains. Antagonism and violence are consequences of thinking that the boundaries between race, gender, and sexuality are real. Baldwin is not suggesting a turn to a false “color-blindness” where one forsakes the histories that have shaped the world, but is urging us instead to recognize that history and to begin to establish another standard, another way of being in which we can connect without destruction.

Connections beyond Abstractions

Baldwin’s imagination transcended nationalism and was grounded in his ethical determination to pursue the human, the human condition, beyond the seemingly rigid abstractions of race, religion, sexuality, nationality, and gender. Baldwin advocates a stance of wonder about human life instead of a condemnation of the unknown, because a stance of wonder can allow one to apprehend mystery and complexity. In apprehending the complexity of lives that exist beyond our limiting concepts we make possible an affinity and solidarity across the fictive geopolitical demarcations of nation-states. The question of human connections remained for him an interior personal one more fundamental than ties among nations. The focus on the individual nuances of fostering human connections involves figuring out how one can understand the self and the other in

⁵⁷ 204 UW

a world that routinely misnames and divides as a means of maintaining a particular order. The capacity for human imagination and the commitment to pursue a life, a mode of existing, beyond the impoverished scripts of the nation is an edifying way of resisting against, and perhaps dismantling, the violence of categorization.

Onto Paris

To continue engaging Baldwin's understanding of freedom as an embrace of human complexity and as a fostering of relationships across fictive boundaries, we can turn to Baldwin's arrival in Paris on November 11, 1948 and the essays he completed abroad from the 1950s onward in which he discusses the complexities of his national and racial identities, as well as larger sociopolitical concerns about the world he was traveling from, America, and the world he was in abroad.

In the non-fiction essays written between the 1950s and the 1960s, Baldwin works to resolve the tensions between a racial identity that he found confining and layered with stereotypes and the free individualism he worked to obtain while in Paris. In the 1977 essay "Every Good-bye Ain't Gone" he wrote that he fled America to try to discover what he calls the "demarcation line" between the things that "happened to me because I was black" and the "things that had happened to me because I was me".⁵⁸ By "me" Baldwin is not speaking about an abstract individualism that is free of historically informed meanings, but instead is emphasizing that what has come to be known as "black" is a stereotype developed to soften white guilt about racial injustices that does not fully encapsulate the forces that make him who he is. In such retrospective moments Baldwin works to discover the extent to which his individuality could be separated from his racial identity. In this, he desires relationships that are based on his unique individuality not his physicality and the meanings that others read onto it.

Baldwin's sentiments are reflective of the American expatriate in Paris, who, broadly speaking, wishes to be seen as just an individual, an individual free of the national history and culture

⁵⁸ PT 642–43

that has shaped one's being. But instead the European confronts the American expatriate unable to "divorce" that individual from the "phenomena which make up his country", thus confirming the American identity of the expatriate attempting to escape it. In this moment the distinctiveness of the American expatriate is exposed, that Americans, both Black and white, are a people wholly alienated from their forebears, to the chagrin of those who wished to blend into European society on the basis of skin color alone. It is then "from the vantage point of Europe [that the American expatriate] discovers his own country" and how the commonalities shared between white and Black Americans are greater than those shared between white Americans and Europeans. Baldwin too experienced this while abroad. Traveling allowed him to pursue an existence beyond the "Negro", his experiences abroad enabled him to affirm – in a way impossible back home – his identity as a (Black) American.

Is the Black American peculiar?

In his Paris essays, Baldwin looks back home in considering what makes the Black American a unique, or peculiar, subject.

In the 1950 and 1959 essays "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" and "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American", Baldwin further develops his idea that the American experience of alienation from European and African culture and history is expressive of American selfhood as a whole: "this depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience".⁵⁹ While keen on presenting this condition of alienation as a national, rather than a racial, trait, Baldwin does note the particularity of the Black American experience. His encounters with African and French Caribbean emigrants in Paris became evidence that his experience as a Black American was a potentially "special experience" that made race secondary to the experience of social alienation and severance from a continuous historical/cultural memory, as he writes, "[The Black American] is perhaps the only black man in the world whose relationship to white men is more terrible, more subtle, and more meaningful than the relationship of bitter possessed to uncertain possessor".⁶⁰

⁵⁹ PT 39

⁶⁰ PT 88

Baldwin's main theme, however, is the encounter between the white and the Black American. Baldwin suggests that in Paris white and Black Americans exist in a type of free space, absent and separate from the segregated United States. As a result of this separation both compatriots avoid mentioning anything that might provoke any recollection of how different things are back home: "The American Negro and white do not, therefore, discuss the past, except in considerably guarded snatches. Both are quite willing, and indeed quite wise, to remark instead the considerably overrated impressiveness of the Eiffel Tower".⁶¹ Being in the free space of Europe highlights the artificiality of the social and racial divisions that permeate the United States and, as Baldwin argues, provokes a sense of contradiction in the American citizen. Realizing the staged nature of their social roles back home throws both white and black Americans into a dilemma, forcing them to reassess their identity in terms of a common cultural heritage, in which they realize, "Americans are as unlike any other white people in the world as it is possible to be," just as the African American is "unique among the black men of the world".⁶² Baldwin's seemingly integrationist musing will be later disrupted and problematized as the realities of American and French racism disturb the expatriate bubble and precipitate what he calls "this crucial day" in which he was compelled as both writer and Black American to take action (PT 174). His idealistic affirmations of American citizenship begin to tremble and expose its precarious foundations when set against the racial conflicts related to segregation and colonialism taking place across the world. Writing, on what this crucial day may be,

...it may be the day on which someone asks him to explain Little Rock and he begins to feel that it would be simpler – and, corny as the words may sound, more honorable – to go to Little Rock than sit in Europe, on an American passport, trying to explain it.

Proclaiming American citizenship and commonality with white Americans from the refuge of France was not enough and the "freedom that the American writer finds in Europe" returns the writer back to "himself, back to America". Baldwin's argument that the Black American is unique among the people throughout the African diaspora continues in his essay "Princes and Powers" in

⁶¹ PT 37

⁶² PT 89, 86

which he covers the 1957 Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists in Paris for *Encounter* magazine.

1957 *Le Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs*

(Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists in Paris)

For the Pan-Africanist or Black Internationalist, that 1957 Conference was a profound moment in history, as Baldwin recounts speeches by Aimé Césaire, George Lamming, Richard Wright, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, as writers and artists from throughout the African diaspora convened in Paris to discuss sociopolitical and cultural issues related to colonialism and the Cold War and the burgeoning non-alignment movement. Baldwin's skills as a journalist are evident in the essays, as he provides the reader with a summation of the conference proceedings interspersed with his commentaries as an American writer. Baldwin's commentary engages the emotional nuances of the proceedings as he looks beyond what is regularly occurring to the tone of the attendees, the underlying messages and feelings that the individuals collectively espouse, as he notes the tension regarding how the world's "non-European population... which had suffered such injustices at European hands" may be responsible for resolving the growing battle between America and Russia for "domination of the world." The gulf between the American Negro delegation and the rest of the conference attendees is mentioned early on in the essay as Baldwin remarks that there was not only a general "distrust of the West," there was an underlying assumption that any Negro traveling abroad today must care about Negroes." Baldwin laments how the critique of the American delegation was used to further justify why the future of Africa should be socialist and not "betrayed backwards by the U.S. into colonialism" as stated by Alioune Diop at the close of his speech. Baldwin seems to dislike the critique and dismissal of the American Negro because he finds that "the American Negro is possibly the only man of color who can speak of the West with real authority, whose experience, painful as it is, also proves the vitality of the so-transgressed Western ideals." The uniqueness of the experience of the American Negro, for Baldwin, is that the land of our forefathers' exile had been made our home. In making America home, the American Negro had purchased a "title to the land" with "our blood," thus produced the impetus to not overthrow the "machinery of the oppressor" but to "make the machinery work for our benefit". The American Negro, – "the connecting link

between Africa and the West” – must find a way of saying “to ourselves and to the world, more about the mysterious American continent than had ever been said before” before attempting to understand “our relation to the mysterious continent of Africa.”

Here, Baldwin conveys a central tenet of Black American liberalism in his view that Black Americans can improve American democracy and help American political ideals reach their full, and ideal, potential. Baldwin sees the positive aspects of America’s democratic society and understands the various injustices that take place in the country as part of its progression towards a liberal ideal. The above passage further illustrates that Baldwin, although critical of capitalism and exploitation as means of acquiring capital and power, is not necessarily a socialist; nor is he convinced that socialism should be chosen over democracy for newly independent countries emerging out of colonialism. Although Baldwin stands for freedom, individuality, and humanism, these ideals can be located within the liberal tradition. Baldwin, then, presents a break in the international Black radical movement in that, although people of African descent were united for an end to colonialism and discriminatory laws, the writers, artists, and activists in the Black internationalist movement envisioned different, even opposing political worlds. Baldwin’s critique illustrates how the socialist aligned movement portrayed itself authentically on the side of Africa, while the American Negro espousal of democracy was portrayed as “saying what the State Department ‘wished’ you to say”, instead of distinguishing how Black Americans were working to remove democracy from the domain of whiteness into something previously unimaginable, Black citizenship. Further into the essay, however, Baldwin does suggest a change of heart, or perhaps a revelation, as he reflects on what “beyond the fact that all black men at one time or another left Africa, or have remained there, do they have in common”? He adduces that it is,

...their unutterably painful relation to the white world.... What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men. And this ache united people who might otherwise have been divided as to what a man should be.

Baldwin suggests that race, Blackness, the “problem of the 20th century”, had the ability to transcend the Cold War binary. Even though the delegates at the conference might differ politically, the unspeakable, the unutterable experience of race, of Blackness allowed unity to arise where division would otherwise permeate, and it is in this transcendence, this way of existing beyond the

options offered by the Cold War, created an outside to the binary, a third option, and the ways in which the non-European people of the world may potentially forge a together-ness in opposition.

To close this section, a quote from Sara Ahmed from *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*:

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.⁶³

⁶³ Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Part 2: Vincent Carter's *The Bern Book: A Record of a Voyage of the Mind***(Reflections on the *Self*)**

Vincent Carter's work, *The Bern Book: A Record of a Voyage of the Mind*, was published in 1970 by the John Day Company. *The Bern Book* is a multilayered text that crosses the boundaries of autobiography, travel writing, and existentialist inquiry as the reader journeys from the depths of Carter's consciousness, to his encounters with Europeans. Throughout the text he endeavors to explain his making of the world he was traveling through, as well as his emerging understanding of self.

The book's title is indebted to Bern, Switzerland, where Carter lived from 1953- 1957 as, he proclaims throughout the text, nearly the only Black American in Switzerland. Most of the book's action takes place in Bern, with a few chapters on Paris, Berlin, and Amsterdam, and chronicles Carter's attempts to write and exist. Carter's book is never explicitly about race or the "Negro problem in America", although the thematic of Blackness is always foregrounded in the background as Carter's Blackness was never invisible and always impacted his existence in Europe. Carter consciously sought to not write about the Negro problem in America, despite calls from critics and publishers who wanted to see a Black man write less about philosophy and literary art and instead offer social and political commentary that essentially mirrored journalism. Carter's emphasis on deep existential inquiry and his lack of allegiance to an essentialized racial identity and writing style is one of the main reasons that the "Bern Book" was the only book Carter published during his life. He died in 1983 at 58. Publishing the "Bern Book" was no easy task, not only because of its experimental style. Herbert Lottman writes in the preface to the book: "digressions are its essence" and reminisces Carter stating "he won't change his way of writing to meet the demands of a publishing industry which basically he doesn't respect and which he feels has little to do with the creative process itself." Lottman's summation of the premise of the "the Bern Book" is fascinating, "a quixotic black man, he lives in Bern...a Negro in a city whiter than any American city I know...creating in isolation year after year a body of writing which some day might make his

present trials a subject of literary historians.” There has yet to be much written on Vincent Carter, and less on the *Bern Book*. Around 2003 literary commentators began discussing how the publication of a work of fiction *Such Sweet Thunder* about his life growing up in Kansas took place twenty years after his death. As Margaret Stafford of the Associated Press writes,

For 40 years, a manuscript about growing up black and poor in Kansas City sat on a shelf in Bern, Switzerland, apparently just another failed effort by an unsuccessful writer. The author, Vincent Carter, stopped writing when he couldn't get the book published. He died in 1983, unknown by the literary world.

It has now been ten years since the publication of Carter's work of fiction, and there has yet to be a deep analytical engagement with his work. Even Darryl Pinckney's profile on the artists as part of his work *Out There: Mavericks of Black Literature* does not deeply analyze the work, but provides more of a historical context and brief commentary on Carter's nonfiction work, which he finds to be “mostly like the diary of an isolated soul...*The Bern Book* isn't a work of memory. It is a work about ambivalence, escape, evasion and the expatriates creed of noble procrastination, noble withdrawal.”⁶⁴ Pinckney does pick up on some aspects of the work, but ambivalence, escape, and evasion in no way capture the totality of Carter's writing, and neglect the several instances in which Carter offers a firm opinion or worldview by focusing on Carter's tendency to evaluate the opposing sides of a situation or idea before determining where he stands on the issue. The experimental or idiosyncratic nature of the book is physically evident in its form: seventy-five short-to-long chapters compose the 297 pages of the book with titles such as “A Chapter Which is Intended to Convey to the Reader the Writer's Fair-Mindedness” “Why I was Depressed and Sunk in Misery” and “A Portrait of Irony as a Part-Time Job”. The narrative is truly a voyage into Carter's state of being as he reflects on his thinking and experiences before reflecting on the outside world and its inhabitants, with the primary subplot being his failed attempts to have his writing published. The narrative has sad moments, as we witness the rejection slips from both American and European publishers piling in Carter's drawer, or read of instances where the problem of race impeded his potential, even when it came to just making friends.

⁶⁴ Pinckney, Darryl. *Out There: Mavericks of Black Literature*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2002. 63. Print.

One enters into the *Bern Book* without a clear sense of where one is and where Carter plans on taking the reader, and from this meandering start one begins to understand Carter, for whom there is no clear beginning or end, just moments and thoughts. There is not even a clear sense of time, as years apparently pass in Bern as the reader floats around in Carter's thoughts and utterances, falling into his digressions and descriptions of moments that held particular emotional importance for him. One would not be too presumptuous in suggesting that the works that Carter was reading may have influenced his writing, as there are moments where his thoughts become deeply philosophical, sometimes psychoanalytic, and other times self-conscious and diffident.

Reading *The Bern Book* through a contemporary lens in which one is aware that he has struggled to have his works published and has not received widespread attention adds a potent sense of sympathy for the still optimistic Carter who often speaks of his high hopes for shaking up the literary world with his writing, and his commitment to artistry and integrity of writing, undistracted by the flux of the real world. Carter is a man who is aware of the realities of race, of Negro-ness, in the 1950s, and often feels haunted by it as he struggles to live beyond, and embrace a self that loves Bach and Beethoven, Dostoevsky, Freud and Spinoza, despite its incongruence with the popular making of the Negro. Formally educated, having spent time at Oxford, finished his bachelors at Lincoln University, and attended graduate school at Wayne State University in Detroit, Carter often felt estranged from the figure of the Negro, knew estrangement between his self and his physicality. This led to much despair, as he realized the problems involved in writing from a "fragmented" self. In his personal introduction to the book, Carter explains his title:

The scene of my partial metamorphosis (which is still going on) is the city of Bern—the object upon which I focused my attention, giving and taking from it those fragmentary impressions which cast some light upon my own identity. So this is essentially a travel "book", a *Reisebuch*. But as I have asserted the relativity of the "time" and of the "place," and have reduced the experiencing "self" to a state of consciousness, this must be considered, above all, a record of a voyage of the mind.⁶⁵

From this excerpt one can glean a sense of Carter's writing style. Erudite, unexpected, with diction that is at times imprecise, his passage has been deeply considered and is self-conscious because of this. Reading the full text before reading his making of it, may cause one to peer at his

⁶⁵ xvi

claim of the reduction of the “self” and the relativity of time and place rather skeptically, as perhaps an overstatement of what the novel is or does, but the passage does help convey some of his narrative strategies and the motivations behind how he chooses his objects of study and focus. In the forthcoming analysis of *The Bern Book*, I focus on his “record of a voyage of the mind” with an emphasis on how the processes of Blackness in motion throughout Europe play a role in his metamorphosis of the self. One of my points of analysis is how Carter’s narrative and journey in Europe illustrates a Black subject grappling with deeply existential themes and questions, corroborating Lewis Gordon’s claim that *Black Existentialism* is not a misnomer. Additionally foregrounded in this study is how Carter’s narrative illuminates and complicates how the act of travel aids Black writers in further understanding the self, home, and other.

The Bern Book’s structure is consistently premised on conversations. Carter moves from talking directly to the reader, to talking to the people around him, to talking to himself, in his thoughts, as he deliberates upon an idea or event. The conversations Carter has with the people around him are used to provide the reader with information that is necessary to understand who he is and why he is living in Bern. The book opens with individuals querying Carter as to why exactly he is in Europe, asking,

“Are you a musician?” “No—I reply coldly.” “Student?” [...] “Oh no!” [...] “No” [...] the conversation dawdles on. He hopes that he will find out indirectly.⁶⁶

Carter is proud to be a writer, and his emphasis that he is not anything but a writer comes from this pride. He is resistant to attempts to compartmentalize his writing, as he answers whether his writing is

“Psychological?” “Of course! People do have psychological aspects, don’t they? Still, I can’t really say—” “Philosophy?” “There’s always some philosophical implication in every story. Naturally! But—”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Carter, Vincent O. *The Bern Book: A Record of a Voyage of the Mind*. New York: John Day C°, 1973. Print. 3

⁶⁷ Carter 3

This conversation is meta, for he is describing the forthcoming narrative, one that is psychological, and philosophical. Carter continues from this conversation and begins describing what he thinks the questioner is thinking:

I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand while he studies me more closely. I don't look like a writer, he thinks: I feel it. And then he thinks, How should a writer look? [...]

I can literally see him straining his imagination to accommodate the new idea of me with which I have confronted him. I can feel him lifting me out of the frame of his previous conception of the universe and fitting me first this way and that, like a piece of a puzzle, into the picture of the writer his mind is conjuring up.⁶⁸

Carter is using this introductory passage of a conversation about what he is doing in Bern as a way of displaying the conversation not as an anomaly but as a standard occurrence. A conversation that occurs so often that Carter has been able to predict what questions will come next and what the questioner is thinking. In a one-page chapter "The Foundation-Shattering Question:" Carter is referring to how he, an American Negro, being a non-journalistic writer in Bern, Switzerland, is foundation shattering for the people he encounters, and then switches to a chapter on his "Personal Problems Involved in Answering the Question" as he provides the reader with a glimpse into his thought process and criteria used when addressing "Why did [he] come to Bern?" as he writes "It all depends upon who is asking it, the tone of voice in which it is asked and in the aura of what light is gleaming in his eyes." From the question of why he is in Bern comes the other standard questions of why/how he ended up in Bern and not "Paris, Rome, or London" to which he answers with the chapter on "Why I did not go to Paris" "Why I Left Amsterdam" and "Why I left Germany".

Carter recounts working in the automobile factories of Detroit in order to save money for his trip abroad, and thereafter arrived in a post-war Paris that was still working to reconstruct the once "bombed-out ruins" that he had driven through ten years previously as a soldier. For a month, Carter lived in a lonely cheap Paris hotel room in which "the atmosphere was musty and depressing. The sheets on the bed were wettish. When I climbed into bed I was reminded of the sensation I

⁶⁸ Carter 4-5

have often experienced upon touching the fungus of a tree”.⁶⁹ Soon, Carter met a “Dutchman with his American wife on the terrace of a brasserie in the Boulevard St. Michel” who described Amsterdam to him as a wonderful place, and he writes, “I left for Amsterdam the next morning. I don’t remember at what time, but it was on the first available train”.⁷⁰ Carter worries that his dismal impression of Paris would come across as typical American short-sightedness and includes a chapter “which is intended to convey to the reader the writer’s fair-mindedness” in a bit of meta, self-conscious narrative in which he responds to the expected criticisms of his commentary on Paris.

Carter’s section on his brief time in Amsterdam begins brightly but ends on a dark note. Amsterdam, he writes, “presented an old problem and several new ones for which I was totally unprepared.” The old problem was not knowing the language, a state of ignorance that “makes one self-conscious and suspicious. For the first time I experienced the uneasy sensation which results from being looked at by people.” Being stared at in public space—whether while walking down the street, eating or drinking at a restaurant or bar—figures heavily into Carter’s narrative and informs his implicit discussion of how his Blackness impacted his time abroad. The new problems in Paris come from his spontaneous encounters with individuals. He first stayed with a young painter who spoke a bit of French, so they, and his wife Tania, were able to communicate. Describing Amsterdam nightlife as he, the painter, and Tania go out, Carter writes:

After some minutes we entered a noisy quarter filled with roving people. There were many brightly illuminated cafes and nightclubs on both sides of the street. Music filled the air, sambas, tangos and jazz. There were Negros, Indonesians and other races about. Seductive women crowded every doorway.

This description lacks sensationalism and provides a historical portraiture of the European climate Carter was moving through, one in which many people of African descent were traveling, from soldiers who spoke English, French, German, and Dutch to a “Negro orchestra [in which] the leader played the trumpet and tried to imitate Louis Armstrong”. The sensuality of Amsterdam does prove to be challenging for Carter, who was at once fascinated but rather sickened by the open

⁶⁹ Carter 16

⁷⁰ Carter 18

display of prostitution, and describes how the “the atmosphere was bathed in a red smoky light. It was very hot...” and then describes dancing with the painter’s wife, “We squirmed around in a little inch of space like naked worms in a hot bucket”.⁷¹ The heat of bodies and passion affected Carter as he “shuffled dizzily this way and that as the music droned with a low wail.” Carter’s apparent conservatism is further exposed as he writes with sly, but mechanical humor, perhaps to mask his discomfort with a façade of ease his return to the painter’s apartment to find the “darkest corner” to undress in, and began to sweat profusely as the “the sounds of lovers making love filled the darkness. They conducted this affair as though they were quite alone in the world”.⁷² Carter could not fall asleep and soon began looking for a new room.

In his search for a new room, Carter encounters two individuals who would shift his time in Amsterdam from heated and awkward to quite emotionally, if not morally, heavy. Carter rarely describes how he does encounter individuals, but simply states “one day I visited a beautiful young lady whose husband was away” (30). The narrative continues with Carter discussing his misadventures traveling with the woman who curiously exclaims, mid-conversation, “We are different and they hate us for it.” Carter is puzzled, for the woman is not a Negro. He continues conversing, “lamenting the plight of the Negro who wandered through the world like a child without his mother, a long way from home” (31), to which the woman responds:

“They made soap of my parents.”

[...]

“Who?”

[...]

“The Germans”

She said the word quietly, as though she had said ‘The Potatoes’. By this time I managed to understand that they were Jews. Awareness crept into my expression. The air in the room was deathly still [...] I remembered that I had seen the smile, which now skirted the periphery of the faces in the room, upon the faces of Negroes when speaking of incidents which occurred during the race riots in Chicago and Detroit, or

⁷¹ Carter 29

⁷² Carter 29

when they spoke of lynching in the south or police brutality in the north. Shortly after I brought my visit to a close (32).

Carter provides apt description of the emotionality of the scene, of how it seemed to break codes of silence as her utterance ventured beyond the norms of small talk. He laments his ignorance in not immediately recognizing the totality of where his inquisition of “who” would lead. Carter was well aware of World War II, having been an American soldier a decade previously. In the early 1950s, although the Nuremberg Trials had already taken place, and human rights laws had been decreed, the wounds of the Holocaust were still fresh as the victims and survivors were relatively young, in their 30s. Carter does not describe attempts to console the individuals in the room – for what words could remedy human loss– nor does he mention sharing his thoughts on the connections between those atrocities and the ones faced by Negroes back in America. Carter, glancing around the room at the weary smiles of those who surrounded him, floats back to America and notes the similarity with the smiles of weary Negroes, as if he was haunted by the those memories rushing back at him of Negroes smiling amidst the material and human destruction that followed race riots, the trauma of bodies hanging from trees just as the Jews in Amsterdam recall bodies made into soap. Carter’s evasion, his flight from the room and from Amsterdam was a response to the emotionality of bodies beating bodies, hanging bodies, destroying and experimenting on bodies in the name of constructed racial differences. Carter’s flight from Amsterdam is a result of his not being far enough away from the tragedy of race. Even in Europe, outside of the geopolitical boundaries of the United States, the Negro came floating back to him, as traumatized smiles haunt the periphery of the room. Departing the room, Carter meets a graphologist and his wife. He gets along with the graphologist out of shared love for the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Discussing Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Carter remarks:

I tried to realize what it must have meant to him to have been an outcast among his own people—and at a time in which there were only a few countries in the western world in which a Jew could find asylum. It made me very sad (34).

This brief remark conveys that Carter is not only empathetic towards the experiences of Jewish people after World War II, but he has reflected on their experiences. His flight from the room was then not out of a lack of concern, but perhaps at an inability to handle the reality of the history in flesh and blood. Carter’s remarks on Spinoza suggest that his penchant for the

philosopher is drawn from a shared understanding of estrangement and wandering without asylum. The fact that Carter was even aware of Spinoza and his enjoyment of his work likely made him different from his community in poor Kansas or the automobile factories of Detroit, and he was aware that as a Negro his place in the world was still precarious and his search for a room in Europe was often thwarted because of his race. The graphologist and Carter leave to visit the house Spinoza lived in, and as they walk Carter briefly hallucinates hearing “they made soap of my parents” before the graphologist proceeds to tell him how, “They all died”, he said. “But I ... I was not taken.” Carter responds:

I turned away from him. How could he tell it, ten years later, I wondered. Why to me! Why tell that horrible mess to me!

[...]

As I walked, I thought: ‘He confesses to everyone to everyone because he didn’t declare his identity and die with the members of his family... He associates me with himself because I am a black man....’ (36)

Carter does not specify whether he identifies with him because he is a Black man who has faced similar atrocities or because he is a Black man in Europe. If it is because he is a Black man in Europe that would further suggest that Carter is choosing not to die with the rest of his family and is thus subject to a similar type of survivor’s guilt. Carter becomes angry with the man and adduces that he derives some type of “perverse pleasure from telling the intimate details of the death of family” (36) in a further reference that he is uncomfortable with the emotional weight of the Holocaust. After parting ways with the graphologist, he attempts to visit other museums in Amsterdam but is paranoid and anxious, writing that “danger was everywhere” and after visiting Descartes and Rembrandt’s houses he came to feel the

invisible fires of Nazism, Judaism, Catholicism, and Puritanism kindling at my feet. Witch hunts in New England came to my mind [...] The decisive thought detached itself from my feelings: ‘This is the place from which they fled!’ Consequently I decided: ‘This is no place for me.’ (36)

His mention of Descartes, a philosopher, and Rembrandt, an artist, and how they both were oppressed allows Carter to illustrate his fear not only of religious and racial persecution but also of the suppression of artists and intellectuals as part of totalitarianism.

Seeing through the guise of sexual and social freedom in Amsterdam, Carter becomes overwhelmed by the histories of atrocity that lay barely concealed under the streets' surface. He arrived in Europe looking for the freedom to write, but instead encountered individuals and institutions that only reminded him of the cloud of oppression, dating back to the paradoxical colonial arrival in North America of individuals ostensibly looking for freedom from religious persecution who enacted mob violence on women declared to be witches. Guilt figures heavily into Carter's passage through Amsterdam, as he is not only fleeing the history of the Holocaust or other persecutions, but also fleeing his painful understanding of being found guilty of a crime created by an arbitrary law. Just as Jews were found guilty of being inferior human beings, Descartes, Carter remembers, may have been assassinated by the Protestant church, Rembrandt was condemned to die for refusing to paint as desired by the burghers and Carter worried that the graphologist may have implicitly found him guilty of running away from the violence in America. Carter not only embraced independence from the norms imposed on Negro literary artistry, he seemed to possess an underlying guilt and anxiety about his escape from the demands of being a Negro, and a Negro writer. He illustrates this later in the narrative, writing,

Now I personally have felt guilty for years, not only for the standard reason which I have just mentioned, but also for the mere fact that I exist. [...] My society taught me from the first moment I entered it, in thousand different ways, that to be black was to be bad [...] (237).

This passage in which Carter conveys his sense of guilt, and by extension shame regarding his Blackness, his racialized being can be further elucidated with a turn to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* in which he explains that to feel shame [guilt] is to acquiesce to the Other's judgment, and to acknowledge that one is what the Other takes one to be.

Carter departs Amsterdam for Germany where he hopes to find another Black American friend from college who has been living there. Carter finds that his friend is gone, having "fell apart like a wet pretzel. He began to drink and carouse in whorehouses" (40). Carter's friend's roommate describes how he fought with his American and Jewish roommates to the entertainment of German onlookers who "had a damned good laugh at the two Americans, the white one and the black one, who couldn't get along together even when they left America" (40). To this, Carter responds with an

insight that mirrors James Baldwin, finding that the antagonism between black and white Americans may not be simply out of hate but out of “the violent and complicated passion of an inexpressible love...” (41). Such insights are interspersed throughout the narrative as Carter remarks on the goings-on around him while providing further information about his self and his making of the world, a man who dreamed of moving to Europe to “become no less than a Dostoevsky or a Proust” (42) wrestled with his love of whiteness in a Black body. Finding that his friend was no longer in Germany, Carter was “enveloped by a profound despair and loneliness in what was an apparently an unfriendly country” (41). Although reluctant to admit it, Carter realized his alienation and inability to find a comfortable space in Germany was likely due to his skin color and foreign nationality. He wandered the streets alone and anxious, and soon boarded the train to Bern, Switzerland.

Having had time to reflect, Carter is now thoroughly rid of his naïve understanding of Europe and connects the oppression of America to the history of oppression in Europe, Asia, and Africa in a conversation with a man in Bern who is unable to understand the presence of racial inequality in the land of freedom and democracy. Carter states, “its not so much different in Europe [...]” and he proceeds to list the Holocaust, the death of miners in diamond mines, the slaughter of Poles by the Russians, the burning of Japanese at Hiroshima, and the clochards of Paris and Italy, concluding,

... I do not wish to excuse America, nor do I wish to overlook the violations of humanity committed by the rest of the world...choose almost any period in any country you wish. The bones of the needlessly slaughtered would build new worlds. The dust would dry up all the seas! (55)

Rather reminiscent of Aime Cesaire’s searing critique of the bloodiness of Western civilization, Carter would disagree with proponents of the uniqueness of the Negro experience, and instead embraces the realization that his experiences as a Negro are but another instance of man’s inhumanity to man. The two men part ways after Carter’s indictment of the man’s claim that the rest of the world is somehow innocent of America’s crimes. In the next page, however, in an experimental narrative move, Carter exposes the fact that he, the narrator, is unreliable. He confesses that the man with whom he had argued could have been a production of his overworked

imagination roiled up by the anxiety and doubt he was experiencing over the true reasons he left America to come to Europe. His argument with the man was more of an argument with his internal thoughts of dissatisfaction with the simple conclusion that he came to Europe to enjoy more social freedom than was available to him in America. He is dissatisfied with the idea that he came to Europe to write about the “superficiality” of life in America, to “find myself and get at the truth of the meaning of life” (56)? If that is so, he questions why he had not written in more than three months or published in years. Continuing his reflection, Carter finds that the reason for his “anxiety and complexes of inferiority; from embarrassment...hypersensitivity” is that he is unsure about his relationship to God (56). Carter has so far not explained or examined his relationship to God, but has more so presented himself as a secular intellectual artist who reveled more in philosophy than theology. In light of the imagined conversation with the man about the atrocities of the world, Carter’s ambivalence about his “conscious relationship to God” could draw from his realization of the reality of human life and history, a history so brutal that it seems to negate any sense of hope, even ten years after World War II. Carter finds himself satisfied with the possibility that this may underpin his desires to travel in Europe, and soon falls in a “troubled, nightmarish sleep” at which point he leaves the reader, and begins a new chapter.

Carter’s description of his life in Bern, where he lived for several years, has echoes of the subjective and psychoanalytic elements of Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*. Carter describes his “public life” in Bern where everyone —men, women, children, cats, and dogs—looked at him all the time, to the point that Carter became increasingly self-conscious and anxious. Fanon’s famous passage in which he recounts a moment of racialization and objectification in which a young boy points at him and exclaims “Look, a Negro!” is almost identical to Carter’s reasoning behind his departure to Europe and his passages on the children and adults who point at him while exclaiming “Ne-ger! Ne-Ger!” Fanon writes in the chapter “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.⁷³

Carter's public life is premised on the visibility of his Black body that causes surprise, desire, and embarrassment in the people around him as he moves throughout Bern. When searching for lodging, women send their daughters away before refusing his application; people refuse to talk to him in public but follow his every move; and he is, above all, refused the privacy that the residents of Bern fight so hard to maintain in a small town. A consequence of his public objectification is that Carter becomes increasingly aware that he is always being watched. One night at a bar he looks at himself in a mirror, as a physicality apart from himself, and sees reddish eyes and a shiny face that cause him to flee from the bar in hopes of preventing further examination. Seemingly already prone to anxiety and the intense self-scrutiny of the philosophically inclined, Carter's residence in Bern seems to be both a respite from the crowded areas of America and Amsterdam but also a source of further alienation and angst. Carter perhaps welcomes these aspects of his existence in Bern as the increased self-scrutiny can cultivate more of the self-understanding that is necessary if he is to write with the integrity he desires. Carter does not wholly despair over his visibility, and embraced the "most terrible thing of all, to face myself."

What matter if he laughed at me as I walked down the street! I would love him, in spite of all! For after all, was not love the final answer--? Cool, objective, undifferentiated love? (121).

Although Carter sought to show to those around him, particularly to a young woman he was beginning to fall for, that his "objective love for her as a human being transcended the moral condemnation of society" (121) his Blackness proved increasingly devastating when the rich young women, who could only meet him clandestinely in the dark, became pregnant and felt forced to get an abortion. Carter offered to marry her, "to go away and have it. Nobody would know" (121) yet the young woman refused, sending Carter back in self-conscious repulsion. He writes,

But there was something deeper still which pained my heart, the thought: She would not marry me because I am a Black man

[...]

⁷³ Fanon, Frantz. "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto. 109. 1967. Print.

I wondered, feeling that for all my moral pretensions there was something unclean in me. I now appeared more repulsive in my own eyes... Nor could I think these thoughts away, they simply had to wear away. They had to break up into fine filaments of light and shift in the aura of nervous tension in which I moved and felt.

Uncannily mirroring Fanon's passage on the return of his now Blackened body: "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day"⁷⁴, Carter's passages on looking at his reflection in a mirror, in a shaky lake, and now through the eyes of a love rejected, convey the shifts and changes in his self-conception as he begins to understand what others see when they gaze at him. This moment of heartbreak and rejection provides a poetic impetus for Carter as he displays a metamorphosis in his thinking, from his argument that undifferentiated 'human' love is possible, to his internalization of racial stereotypes and realization that race obstructs unqualified love. The loneliness sets back in for Carter, who expresses a desire for an authentic friendship, unpolluted by the racial realities of the world throughout the narrative. Carter's narrative instead conveys a life of unfulfilled dreams, as he fails to publish, becomes increasingly reliant economically on the few nice people in Bern willing to offer assistance, and lacks a firm understanding of his making of the world as his ideas change with new occurrences. The dual illustration of his personal desires and self-conceptions and the "realities" of life in Bern expose the conception of the self that is propping up his ego, and allows him to continue on in hopes that it will get better.

The moments in the narrative when his conception of a floating self—the philosopher and literary artist with autonomy and reason with the potential to become the next Proust—is broken and collapsed are the moments when Carter descends in despair as he realizes that he has not escaped racialization and he remains poor. For instance, Carter when the people in Bern call him "Neger" Carter initially believes that word is disconnected from the "Nigger" he is used to hearing in America and abroad. He tries to condition his emotions not to respond negatively when he hears "Neger", a task he finds difficult, but soon discovers that "Nigger" does, in fact, exist in Bern and covers his body and racialized skin. When writing radio programs for a Bern radio station, Carter is continually forced to write essentialized and superficial stories of Negro spirituals and his

⁷⁴ Fanon, Frantz. "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto. 109. 1967. Print.

sociopolitical viewpoints on the “race problem” in America, despite his wish to listen to what he considers to be the polished, educated sounds of Marian Anderson and to write programs of complexity. The radio station administrators believe that Negro spirituals represent the most authentic and deepest expression of Negro life, to which Carter responds by asking how people in Sweden can seriously presume to know the deepest and most authentic meanings of Negro life, especially since they do not know even their own. Further corroborating that racism exists in Bern, a grocery store owner asks Carter if he is interested in dressing in African garb to help promote a banana sale. Any previous romanticism about the people of Bern, or his hopes of being treated as a human being undifferentiated by the norms of society were quelled within Carter.

Carter’s narrative is reflective of Albert Camus’s notion of absurdity—the confrontation between man’s desire for significance, meaning, and clarity on one hand and an ultimately silent, cold universe on the other. The various encounters Carter has throughout his time traveling in Europe can be seen as encounters with the absurd, in which the meanings and beliefs once foundational to Carter’s worldview were betrayed and thus his understanding of the world was thrown into flux. Carter’s attempts to be objective, to look at multiple sides of an issue or event caused him to realize that no meanings were ultimately true, that everything was relative. Like Camus, Carter witnessed individuals die for ideas they or others believed to be central to life, whether in World War II or as part of the larger tragedy of race, ideas that ultimately held no transcendental truth and, perhaps, denied the individuals access to the larger meanings of life and humanity. Nietzsche occasions the ascendance of the absurd with “the death of God”, a death that occurs quite early in Carter’s narrative as he loses a firm grip on God as the ultimate “truth” of existence. Absurdity is a result of a break, a discrepancy between intention and outcome, aspiration and reality. Absurdity means to realize that our concerns are arbitrary, but still personally meaningful. There are several instances in which Carter arrives at a renewed understanding of his self or the human condition, such as

I found myself thinking aloud that *All sense is nonsense!* And the mere reflection upon the thoughts which I had—in all seriousness—conceived in the past was enough to sink me into profoundest despair, which despair appeared, in the same instant, laughable because “Ironical” (199).

It isn't real, this whole hurting vanity-ridden cockeyed world isn't really real. It's all in the mind... For a fragment of an instant my sensibility would become sharp and clear, new and dangerous perspectives would suddenly loom before my eyes and fade into obscurity (267).

The moments of absurdity in which a chasm emerges between thoughts and aspirations and reality were provoked by Carter's Blackness, which prevents the narrative from being entirely representative of Camus' thinking. Carter's narrative includes several instances in which he attempts to be present himself as a human being, a literary artist with a burgeoning philosophical understanding of the world, but was continually thwarted by racial norms and prejudices that opened an absurd chasm. Aware that race and racism were not real, while at the same time very real, Carter realized the lack of an ultimate truth in the world. Carter's narrative illustrates how race and being a Negro is an absurd, surreal existence of objectification, and the ascription of false, superficial stereotypes onto a self that is unable to escape the body, and instead becomes estranged from the body, and from the world. Lewis Gordon has noted how oppressed people, by the conditions of their oppression, turn inward, and become self-conscious. Gordon states in an interview:

Oppression limits the options one has to affect humanity [...] if your options are very severely limited, as in the case of, say, a prisoner in a straitjacket, you can become so internal in your discursive practices that all you can do is live inside your mind. Oppression always pushes people toward inward evaluation. They are constantly examining, testing themselves, questioning themselves: "Am I good enough?" "Am I right?" "Is there something wrong with me?" It happens all the time.⁷⁵

Thus, the moments of Carter's inward examination can be seen as a result of the realization of racialization as he encountered racism looking for rooms, attempting to make friends, and seeking work. In realizing the absurdity of this self-consciousness as the length of his time in Europe increased, time during which small talk increasingly descended into a re-memory of atrocity, Carter slowly began to recognize and examine the flaws, or rather, the *humanness* of Europeans, and humanity at large. Albeit often only in his mind, Carter realized the myth of the superiority of a single racial group, and the myth of his own inferiority. The moments of absurdity, in which Carter was permitted a higher understanding of reality through his double consciousness, allowed Carter to

⁷⁵ Gordon, Lewis, and Linda Alcoff. "A Philosophical Account of Africana Studies: An Interview with Lewis Gordon." *Nepantla: Views from South* 4.1 (2003): 165-89. Web.

break through the colonial understanding of the world, and proceed toward increased, more authentic self-understanding and consciousness, as evidenced in the following two passages:

Words and looks cannot faze me now! I declared as the nigger (I thought I had lost him...) tugged at my sleeve. And I cried out in guilty surprise:

Nigger? Why—what is that? Me?

Why, why yes! I am a nigger, I admitted, choking upon the ironic humor bubbling in my throat: That's just what I am, a black nigger! I would say this over and over to myself, aloud, wondrously, as I sang through the frozen streets—until I felt wonderful, or so I imagined (266).

My life was very confusing when I discovered that nonblack persons were not innately more intelligent than I. I had to learn to act a new way and under very discouraging circumstances. The problem was to keep the secret which I discovered and yet act as though I didn't know it. I wanted to stay alive, you see, just as you do (236).

The first passage conveys a moment of Fanonian recognition in which the racialized subject responds to racial ascription by embracing it, as Fanon resolved “to assert myself as black man.” By laughingly and ironically embracing his racialization, Carter refuses a passive acceptance of the identity placed upon himself, but instead displays that he knows the secrets of the world, that words and looks hold no ultimate truth. In the second passage his discovery of the myth of European superiority allows him to pursue a new way of being that Fanon spoke of. Speaking of the “nigger,” which is, at once, a word and an object, illustrates how language, words are not just some ‘thing’ added on to one’s being-for-others, but a ‘thing’ that *expresses* one’s being-for-others. Such a word is a ‘thing’ that confers a significance, a meaning upon Carter that Others have already found a word for, and that Carter is now acknowledging, processing, and rearticulating, making the word some ‘thing’ that he has conferred upon his self.

Jean-Paul Sartre says, in *Being and Nothingness*, “the essence of the relations between consciousness...is conflict” and this essence is represented lucidly throughout Vincent Carter’s *The*

*Bern Book: A Record of the Voyage of the Mind.*⁷⁶ Upon a close reading of what can arguably be Carter's 297-page *magnum opus* one realizes that it can be situated squarely within the Black existentialist and modernist traditions. In focusing on his travels through Europe, Carter's conversations and experiences are reminiscent of existentialist *situations*, moments in which human beings encounter each other to create meaning that they did not necessarily intend to create. Carter provides stark description of the hyper-visibility that Ralph Ellison noted the Black subject experiences, and of the paradoxical plight of the educated Black who does not find it easier to integrate but instead experiences a type of invisibility because the educated Negro exemplifies the impossible and proves incompatible with the racist notion of the Negro. Carter's empathetic encounters with Jewish people, and outcasts in Bern is illustrative of James Baldwin's ideas of how shared ideas or experiences of suffering, of the fragility of human life can lead to relationships that cross racial and national boundaries. The book itself is steeped in the modernist literary tradition as Carter illustrates his multiple selves in the tradition of Virginia Woolf, and concludes the novel with an open, ambiguous ending, and showcases a clear turn towards the interior, personal dimensions of experience and reality as he addresses the question of the meaning of life after the death of God, and wonders how to maintain a belief in hope and optimism in an age of totalitarianism and violence.

The Bern Book is a beautiful, humanly flawed narrative in which a Black man exposes his vulnerability, his mistakes, his passions, desires, ambivalences, and his fears as he attempts to write, *to write!* —for the Black, the shipped, enslaved, and ostensibly freed who was once deemed unspeakable—not to be spoken of and unheard. To utter his consciousness in words and passages, his making and being of the world, Vincent Carter deserves the last words, written on October 25, 1957, about how understanding the Other is necessary to love the Other.

Man begins with "I" the "One." He suffers because he imagines all, which is other than "I," the "One," to be hostile, and therefore a threat to his existence; dangerous. But the existence of "One" presupposes the existence of "Two," "You" who are other than "I." But when we investigate this entity, which is "You" and not "I" we find that is not as un "I-like as we as we imagined. The more we investigate it the more we know

⁷⁶ Tennessen, Herman. *Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness*. Edmonton. Print.

we know about it, and the more we understand about it. The more we understand it the more we love it (297).

Part 3: Richard Wright's *Pagan Spain*

(Reflections on the *Other*)

We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without one's own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign (but, of course, the questions must be serious and sincere).⁷⁷

Like James Baldwin and Vincent Carter, Richard Wright traveled extensively in the United States, then in Europe before the 1950s. A native of Mississippi, Wright lived in Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, where he joined a local black literary group, and became attracted to the Universal Negro Improvement Association. In 1931, he published the short story *Superstition* in Abbott's Monthly Magazine, and displayed his brilliantly dark descriptive skills as he writes, for instance, "At that moment the coming tragedy cast its shadow and that shadow, like all the shadows that attend human events, was unseen by human eyes. The causes in our lives that later develop into glaring effects are so minute, originate in such commonplace incidents, that we pass them casually, unthinking, only to look back and marvel".⁷⁸ Wright's writings deeply engage the minute 'causes in our lives' the causes that are, at times, structural like economics, politics, nationalism, and race, but also inter-personal, and psychological, dripping down from structures into the crevices of human experience and interaction. After moving to New York, and becoming widely acclaimed as a writer and thinker, Wright moved to Paris in 1947, having already visited there in 1946 during which time he, along with Césaire, Alioune Diop, and Senghor, founded the magazine *Presence Africaine*, a hugely important Pan-African magazine. In Paris, Wright began reading heavily in existentialism, including the works of Heidegger and Husserl, at the same time developing relationships with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Wright traveled through Europe, moving from Italy when his novel *Native Son* was released to Belgium when a dramatic performance of that same novel was taking place, and also making visits to Trinidad, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and Haiti in the early 1950s. In 1953 Wright traveled

⁷⁷ Bakhtin, M. M., and Michael Holquist. "Response to a Question from Novy Mir." *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas, 1986. 7. Print.

⁷⁸ Fabre, Michel. *The World of Richard Wright*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1985. Appendix A Print.

extensively in the then Gold Coast of Africa, still a British Colony, including visits to Sierra Leone and Accra, where he met Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, and traveled back to England to discuss his experiences with George and Dorothy Padmore. Wright's travels throughout the world, and his involvement in a variety of sociopolitical and literary movements, without necessarily advocating those movements, such as Communism and Negritude, underpin his exclamation in *White Man Listen!* "I'm a rootless man but I'm neither psychologically distraught nor in any wise particularly perturbed because of it." Wright proceeds to confess to a type of radical solitude in which he does not "hanker after, and seems not to need, as many emotional attachments, sustaining roots, or idealistic allegiances as most people" (xxix). This solitude is, of course, derived from Wright's historical situation as a product of racism in the United States that left him estranged from his country, as well as his estrangement from political organizations that found the Negro, the problem of race, to be a secondary issue. Wright proclaimed that he could find home anywhere on earth, and his extensive travels and political engagement with the problems of freedom in Europe, Asia, and Africa illustrates a deeper commitment to a cosmopolitanism that sought a political solidarity and understanding across national and racial boundaries. The focus of this section is Richard Wright's only nonfiction book written about a European Country, and came after seven years studying in Paris. *Pagan Spain* is not a travel guide for potential tourists but a "chronicle that portrays a nation scarred by the Spanish civil war and the dictatorship of Francisco Franco" (x).

Wright took three month-long trips to Spain in 1954 and 1955, and his final revised text was completed in July 1956. The text combines several narrative styles, including first-person, eyewitness accounts, commentary, anecdotes, vignettes, and dramatic dialogue. The work is not explicitly about race. Wright foregrounds his self into the background, and his daughter Julia Wright has argued that "the very aspects of suffering, oppression, and religious mysticism Wright is most sensitive to in Spain are those which molded his own oppressed youth in the American South. He is often fascinated in Spain by situations which echo or counterpoint his own experience of oppression in America" (xii). The Spain that Wright traveled in and wrote about was in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, which was fought between the Republicans and the Nationalists, a rebel group lead by General Francisco Franco. The Nationalists prevailed and Franco ruled Spain under a dictatorship between 1936-1975. Spain under Franco included several doctrines of authoritarianism:

nationalism, militarism, anti-communism, anti-anarchism, anti-Semitism, anti-socialism, and anti-liberalism. Franco promoted a unitary national identity, and Catholicism became the national religion, and perhaps the cultural foundation. Spain's economy, crippled by the civil war, was further devastated under Franco's policy of autarky in which he cut off all international trade, and a free market economy wasn't activated until 1959.

In this section on Richard Wright's *Pagan Spain* the focus is not to elucidate the Spain that Wright paints, but to discuss *how*, through what methods, he paints Spain. How does one go about writing about travel? How does one find the familiar, broadly defined to include socio-politics, in the foreign? Through what filters does Wright process the foreign?

On the very first page of *Pagan Spain* Richard Wright positions himself as a solitary man, alone with the elements, charting a new path, "under the blue skies of the Midi, just a few hours from the Spanish frontier"(1) as he begins to establish in the reader a sense of place. He states, coolly, "I was alone. I had no commitments." He exposes his ambivalences about traveling to Spain; he is already too familiar with totalitarian governments as he had been born under "an absolutistic racist regime in Mississippi" and worked under the "political dictatorship of the Communist party of the United States." Wright explains that he been unable to "stifle a hunger to understand what had happened [in Spain] and why. [...] An uneasy question keeps floating in my mind: How did one live after the death of the hope for freedom?" (1-2) Here, Wright accounts for his realism, his cynicism as a product of his past, and continues as he presents Spain as a place where hope for freedom has been lost, replaced by a dictatorship. The first section of the book is, then, appropriately titled "Life After Death". His narrative is overall replete with pastel descriptions, nothing too bright but not completely grey, as he describes the first Spanish town he enters as "too quiet, dreary" and then his hotel room, "My shower had no curtain when I used it, water flooded the floor...several times an hour the electric bulb dimmed momentarily" (4-5). In every town he enters he notes the presence of police and Civil Guards, tangible representations of Spain's political circumstances. The reader is forced to depend on his description of the landscape, to see the land through his eyes as he

describes a “bleak, seemingly diseased and inhospitable landscape that grudged the few patches of scrubby vegetation showing against vast humped mounds of leprous-looking rubble” (7). Such a description begs the question: Is the landscape unequivocally bleak or is that simply how Wright interprets it? Could someone else look at the landscape and see something different? Although Wright draws on conversations with the locals he encounters to gain an understanding of the cultural, sociopolitical aspects of Spain, he does not seem to be at pains to understand how they *see* Spain, what they make of the country they live in everyday. Wright seems to be a solider who has yet to recover from the perils of war, when he runs into two Civil Guards, writing:

I drove over the bridge and rolled on, uncertain, feeling a naked vulnerability creeping down the skin of my back. I was not accustomed to armed strangers of unknown motives standing in my rear and I waited to hear raatatatat and feel hot slugs of steel crashing into my car and into my flesh.

This passage is visually violent, as Wright transmits to the reader his imagining of bullets penetrating the metal car and his skin. Of course, “nothing happened” but the moment is jarring and increases the sense of danger that seems to permeate the Spanish towns. Wright has a knack for reenacting violence that he has not experienced, as proved most chillingly in his 1935 poem “Between the World and Me” in which he embodies an individual being lynched and burned by a mob in the American South. He again illustrates here that violence can be transmitted and ricocheted mentally, through words and images, into felt fleshy entities even for a subject, a reader, whose skin has never experienced being cut. In these interstitial moments, usually occupying the space between dialogue and description, Wright presents an image of the man in the world, how he as individual interacts with and makes sense of the foreign world around him. He provides a description of the motivations behind his actions, noting that he raised his hand to the solider a “shy, friendly salute” in order to see their reactions. The two soldiers “raised their hands at me in return” at which Wright’s “tensions ebbed a bit” (8). The inter-subjective negotiation of Wright and his environment continues as he attempts to discern what a young woman is thinking: “Did I remind her of Moors? The irregular paving stones made my car do a nervous dance.” (9) Here the reader moves from Wright’s personal thoughts to a description of the scene. He provides two viewpoints of his interaction with the environment: the first is mentally from an introspective narration, and the second is materially, as he and his cars bounce along the irregular paving stones, which together

provide a multilayered understanding of what is happening to him as he enters into the Spanish village. Wright's patience is exquisite when he provides stark detail of some interactions, while keeping some instances ambiguous, transitioning from a fast forwarded note that "hours later I entered the bleak suburbs of Barcelona" to a slow motion note of "I watched her staple my travelers checks to the documents, stamp them, present them to an elderly man who leaned back in a swivel chair and studied them minutely. He sighed and stamped them." (10) In the slow-motion sequence of Wright presenting his passport, small details become enlarged and rendered anew and suspenseful, while the reader nervously imagines dense, dusty silence as the Spanish administrators inspect his documents. In explaining aspects of Spain's culture, or his experiences in the country, Wright sometimes steps aside and allows the dialogue of the locals to educate the readers, and other times he presents his own analysis, his own reading of the situation at hand, as seen here:

It was beginning to make sense; I was a heathen and the devout boys were graciously coming to my rescue. In their spontaneous embrace of me they were acting out a role that been implanted in them since childhood. I was not only a stranger, but a "lost" one in dire need of being saved (12).

How does one understand Wright's reading of this instance? After meeting two young Spanish men, Wright goes with them to a Catholic church where they discover that he is not catholic but closer to an atheist. Thereafter, Wright notes that he was feeling "self-conscious" as they moved past "men, women, and children kneeling, praying, crossing themselves..." to a reach a "vast basin of white marble" (12). After betraying his self-consciousness, the reader is forced to question Wright's analysis of the young men's actions. What complicates Wright's comments is the totalitarianism of Spain. One could critique Wright's comments on Spain's Catholicism as culturally insensitive to a people's way of life. However, totalitarianism problematizes any claims of cultural authenticity and provides a justification for any cultural critique that would break the façade of Spain's culture as natural and expose it as engineered and working in the interests of Franco's regime. Wright's biting, cynical analysis of Spanish realities is tied to his belief that the lack of freedom in Spain justifies his rather harsh perspectives. His stark, unromantic descriptions of the landscape and his emphasis on the dereliction and poverty are drawn from Franco's regime, spoiling any of the positive aspects of

Spain that Wright could have seen. It is as if one traveled to America, aware of its bloody history and present: could one simply write back home, in good conscience, with a focus on its beauty?

This question falls back on the tension between structures and aesthetics in that when one chooses to focus on the political or the economic, on the oppressed peoples, one may be charged with focusing on the negative harsh realities that deny the capacity for beauty to emerge even in the darkest contexts. But in an instance in which the experiences of the oppressed are concealed as the political and economic structures responsible for their oppression are obscured and hidden, it becomes important that writing pay attention to those unrepresented stories. The many critics of *Pagan Spain* illustrate the importance of Wright's writing. The book did not receive a warm reception in America where people were uninterested in critiquing Franco's regime due to the climate of American cold war anti-communism in the 1950s. Further, American Catholics criticized Wright for his "complete lack of awareness of, or appreciation for, anything pertaining to the supernatural" (xv). Wright approaches Spain as a critical outsider for which nothing was sacred, and everything was absurd. Unconcerned with offending anyone or being seen as culturally insensitive, or politically incorrect, Wright's realist, cynical apprehension of the Spanish cultural and sociopolitical landscape produced assessments such as

Convinced beyond all counterpersuasion that he possesses a metaphysical mandate to chastise all of those whom he considers the "morally moribund," the "spiritually inept," the "biologically botched," the Spaniard would scorn the rich infinities of possibility looming before the eyes of men, he would stifle hearts responding to the call of a high courage, and he would thwart the will's desire for a new wisdom...He would turn back the clock of history and play the role of God to man. How poor indeed he is... (288)

Taking the role of the critical, estranged outsider can allow one to evaluate structures and institutions as problematic and guilty of impeding freedom and human rights, even those that are otherwise deemed sacred. It is often outsiders that provide the most clear and critical apprehensions of a society, as they are able to see it in, perhaps, its reality and absurdity, as Tocqueville did when he visited America and witnessed American enslavement. Wright's critical writing is further justified because he writes in the pursuit of freedom, with an awareness of how Western modernity and democracy and the Communist alternative have both proved inadequate to guarantee the freedoms

and rights of people of color. Thus, Wright's 'double vision', similar to Dubois' double consciousness, provided a stronger moral grounding on which to lodge his critique.

An uneasy loneliness settled upon me, for I drove hour after hour and failed to see a single other car. The highway was an empty path stretching through an empty world, belong only to me, the desolate peaks, the sun-filled sky, and the whirling birds. (136)

In this quite beautiful passage, Wright's travel narrative is in the stage of the 'voyage', movement through space. Travel can be seen as organized around the experiences of 'departure', 'voyage' 'encounters' 'rest' and 'return', and *Pagan Spain* is composed of a series of these episodes, as there are various moments where Wright departs, voyages, rests, and returns. These episodes, or moments, provide the narrative with a temporal structure that raises certain expectations of things to happen. This journey plot pattern gives order and meaning to the various experiences Wright had in Spain and connects these events, making it seem as if they were dependent upon each other, and not just spontaneous, as if the progression was natural and seamless. The descriptive passages of Wright's movement through space, as he passes "vast, high flat, surrealistically shaped mounds of red laterite" (136) or while on the train, "Some time later I was awakened by the train's jerking motion, the clack-clack-clack of the wheels over steel rails, the soft sound of rhythmic hand clapping..." (184). Here, Wright moves the narrative by illustrating how progress in the travel narrative is related to the representation of experience and apprehension of space and time. The traversed spaces are unified in Wright's experiences and recounting, which he punctuates with dialogic episodes, names, and portraits of faces, like the "mustached, fastidious, elderly man" (183). With such, even examples of pure description of the place of travel or the people involve the portrayal of Wright's subjective, human consciousness engaged in goal-oriented activity, a progression towards somewhere. All this adds up to create an effect of human-scale space and of a humanized experience of time. Wright's travel narrative provides the reader with a basic model for "viewing" space and events within time. The reader 'sees' Spain in relation to Wright's perception and the travel story becomes a double reading of one place: the world as it is 'seen' in description and the world as it is narrated by Wright.

Ruminating On Seeing (The Gaze)

It is not possible to simply see the world, to look at the world through eyes and acquire an unprocessed, unmediated understanding. Meanings and histories are always circulating throughout and converge in the act of seeing, so that in the nanoseconds in which our eyes transmit information to our brain, meaning intertwines with those neurological messages producing an output in which we *know* or, at least, have an idea of what we see when we look upon the vastness that surrounds us. In the context of Blackness, both the act of seeing and the moment of being seen are imbedded in a history of violence. bell hooks writes, in her chapter *The Oppositional Gaze*, of how “the politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze” which led to “the real life public circumstances wherein black men were murdered/lynched for looking at white womanhood, where the black male gaze was always subject to control and/or punishment by the powerful white Other...”.⁷⁹ Wright was aware of how Blackness, as some(one/thing) that is seen and sees, is not only connected to a violent history, but connected to socio-politics as well. In the autobiographical short story, *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow*, is the following passage in which he is a hotel busboy who walks into a guestroom in which a white man and woman lay naked on the bed:

“Nigger, what in hell you looking at?” the white man asked me, raising himself upon his elbows. “Nothing,” I answered, looking miles deep into the blank wall of the room. “Keep your eyes where they belong, if you want to be healthy!” he said. “Yes, sir”⁸⁰

The gaze also underpins the Duboisian concept of double consciousness in which one is aware of one’s self while at the same time aware of how one is seen as an object (amidst objects), in which one is split, not only as an American and a Negro, but along other “warring identities” that Vilashini Cooppan delimits in an article on Nationalism and Globalism in the *Souls of Black Folk*, which include the

... biological and the cultural, the social and the psychic, the material and the metaphoric, the historical and the spiritual, the national and the global, the forward-moving plot of racial progress and the backward-moving gaze of racial memory, all

⁷⁹ hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End, 1992. 115-118. Print.

⁸⁰ Wright, Richard. “Ethics of Living Jim Crow.” *Uncle Tom’s Children: Four Novellas*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938. 11. Print.

paradoxically, explosively, condensed into the fraught figure of the black man in America.⁸¹

It is a state of infinite ambivalence, of internal civil war, that makes the acts of seeing for the Black(ened) subject—that is, the Black gaze—over-determined, loaded with an abundance of meaning that is difficult to conceptualize along any rigid binary. As Richard Wright told an African acquaintance in Ghana, “I’m black, ... but I’m Western”, in a succinct but considered encapsulation of the warring two-ness that composes his being. Many critics have taken Wright’s admission that he remains a Western despite, or, perhaps, because of, his Black-American-ness as a way to critique his travel writing, particularly on Ghana and Spain. One such critic, John Lowe, writes on *Pagan Spain*:

Wright seems very much in the mode of the Western traveler in Spain, as many of the early reviewers of the book noted. By this I mean that he disdains much of what he sees, and debases it both by derogatory description, by excluding much of what has always and still does make Spain beautiful and appealing, and by depicting the country as monotonous and paralyzed.⁸²

Lowe’s summation of *Pagan Spain* argues that even though Wright was a Black writer traveling, his literary representation of Spain does not depart from the Western gaze. Scholars, such as Maria Ng, have noted how travelers are vessels of cultural habits that accompany them as they travel. The consequence of this is that their travel narratives reflect the cultural biases and assumptions of their home countries. Her first book *Three Exotic Views of Southeast Asia* (2002) concludes, however, that the problem in analyzing representation, as John Lowe does in the above quotation, is that “to speak only of how we should not represent other cultures just serves a legislative function”.⁸³ Evaluating Wright’s representation of Spain is a form of policing in which one circumscribes what the “mode of the Western traveler” is in contradistinction to some *other* unspecified non-Western gaze. Lowe seems to suggest that the unspecified non-Western mode of travel would apparently celebrate what makes Spain “appealing and beautiful” as if the traveling and writing colonizer’s did not do so on the

⁸¹ Cooppan, Vilashini. “The Double Politics of Double Consciousness: Nationalism and Globalism in the Souls of Black Folk.” *Public Culture* 17.2 (2005): 299. Print.

⁸² Smith, Virginia Whatley. *Richard Wright’s Travel Writings: New Reflections*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2001. 130. Print.

⁸³ Ng, Maria Noëlle. *Three Exotic Views of Southeast Asia: The Travel Narratives of Isabella Bird, Max Dauthendey, and Ai Wu, 1850-1930*. White Plains, NY: EastBridge, 2002. 173. Print.

coasts of Western Africa and South America. The Western mode of travel denigrates in order to dominate, it disdains and dehumanizes in order to conquer, it annihilates humans and non-humans alike in order to create an imaginary empty space, and it crafts beauty and appeal to be as wanton and fleshy as Eve's apple. Whereas Wright, if we concede that he does disdain Spain, does so in a pursuit of freedom for all human beings from totalitarian regimes no matter if they are in the form of government, the Church, or patriarchy. Writing and traveling in pursuit of understanding and freedom must, then, exceed and comprise something other than the murderous and exploitative "western mode of travel". Lowe's commentary should provoke questions of what constitutes "appealing and beautiful" and to whom? Why should we see Wright's representation of Spain as not only outside of the beautiful but also as "derogatory"? Does the work truly depict Spain as "monotonous and paralyzed" or is this more accurately Lowe's reading and subsequent envisioning of Wright's representation of Spain?

Although Wright was skeptical that Spaniard hairdressers would be able to style and cut his "fairly wooly hair" he decided to overcome his 'qualms' about how some people "have very strong racial feelings" and to get a haircut (91). After conversing, his barber remarks on how Wright has an ability to 'see' that is different from the other tourists who visit Spain:

"Nations rise and fall," I said philosophically. "The thing that worries me about Spain is the suffering—"

"Ah, you have *eyes*! You can see," he congratulated me. "Most tourists come here because it's cheap, no? But they do not see; they do not care to see." He breathed asthmatically snipping the blades of his scissors as he clipped my hair. (92)

To see, then, is to work towards a consciousness of the manifold social, political, psychological, and historical makings of a place; it is to be more than a passive observer, more than just a transient 'tourist' who still manages to leave the markings of his parasitic passage.

Closing Thoughts on Wright:

Implications For Black Americans and International Human Rights

Although Wright's *Pagan Spain* has been read as cosmopolitan or transnational, it has been routinely

critiqued and remains in relative obscurity, illustrating that the 'world' is not receptive to a Black man looking back and writing about the Other when the Other is a European country. Wright's work is subtle in comparison to the searing indictments of Western civilization by Césaire or Fanon. Wright's commitment to 'New Journalism' informed by Chicago sociological methods leaves the writing, to be honest, relatively flat as it accommodates both a literary portraiture of the geographic and cultural landscape of Spain as well as the voices of the Spaniards and expatriates that Wright encounters. Wright's work provokes important questions of the Black American interested in what lies beyond his or her geographical borders. What would it mean for a Black American to write about Lord's Resistance Army in East and Central Africa, or human rights abuses in China, or violent anti-corporation resistance efforts in the Niger Delta Region in Nigeria? Is the Black American required to step outside of the American imperial gaze that so often cloaks foreign affairs, or is the Black American so American that would it be difficult to even envision another way of looking? Is the Black American who looks abroad always looking with an oppositional gaze? What does it mean that one can safely suggest that the majority of Black Americans abroad or in foreign affairs, historically and contemporarily, work for the State or military?

With the demise in popularity of non-alignment movements, Global South solidarities, and the triumph of a cultural conception of the Black-African diaspora among Black Americans, those who are interested in foreign affairs or international travel are either wholly unconcerned with the politics/economics of the countries to which they travel (e.g. passages to the Caribbean) or engage with the politics through an imperial human rights model. It is not that Wright is not *free* to criticize Spain 'objectively' but it is that it becomes difficult to discern how Wright is different from any other disparaging American who critiques what he or she sees as the liminal freedoms of other States in favor of an American *ideal*. The presence of American troops and military bases in Spain and throughout Europe, a sign of a burgeoning US hegemony, seem almost anecdotal to Wright who focuses on the Spanish Catholic Church that he finds to be oppressive and archaic. Wright seems to become anti-patriarchal only to further criticize the Catholic Church as he interviews prostitutes and overly-protected young virgins to provide further evidence of the church's overreaching, overbearing influence on Spanish culture. The problematic aspect of Wright's travel writing, as this is an issue discussed in reference to his book *Black Power* that chronicles his travels in Ghana, is that he does not depart from a disparaging gaze. The question that remains, then, is

freedom for the Black American traveler the freedom to be disparaging if he or she wanted, or is it freedom to see the world in a way that is different from the American gaze?

Chapter Conclusion:

From Albert Camus's *The Rebel* (1956)

The rebel slave ... established, by his protest, the existence of the master against whom he rebelled. But at the same time he demonstrated that his master's power was dependent on his own subordination and he affirmed his own power: the power of continually questioning the superiority of his master.⁸⁴

In the processes of traveling in the 1950s—wandering, encountering, observing—James Baldwin, Vincent Carter, and Richard Wright wrote, judged, moralized, and theorized in *Black*. Theorizing in *Black* is a theorization that is done through the lens of condemnation, through the lens of an absurd human condition whose dignity has been assaulted, who has been dislocated, cast upon seas with anemic connections to native lands, a condition that flinches and jumps at the slightest unexpected move from fear of future degradation. Albert Camus' novels explores the visions and ideas of individuals in such absurd conditions, such as the worldview of a former inmate of Dachau, one of the first Nazi concentration camps, who is “liberated” or freed but left physically frail and distrustful due to experiences of brutality and deprivation. Camus termed the philosophy he was attempting to develop an inexistential philosophy—a philosophy of exile—for one of the effects of the absurd is solitude—each man cut off from every other man. In the three sections that composed this chapter we see Baldwin, Carter, and Wright attempting to articulate their feelings of alienation and estrangement, not in a strictly Marxist sense, but as conditions of racism. Not only were they cut off not only from full self-understanding because of stereotypes, they were cut off from the full possibilities of human relationships because of their Blackness, as most devastatingly observed in Carter. Attempting to alleviate the problem of race, each writer looks for connections: Baldwin articulates a uniquely alienated American identity that differs from both the European and the African. Baldwin's travels in Paris led him to see the intimate and violent relationship and similarities between the Black and White Americans, and further to articulate his view on the peculiar position of the Black American as an intermediary, a translator, between what we know now as the Global North and the Global South. Carter employs respectability politics and his own intellectualism. Carter's travels in Europe provided him a deeper understanding of how anti-Black racism not only shaped his everyday experiences but also his understanding of self. Carter's conclusion — that in the

⁸⁴ Camus, Albert. *Albert Camus, the Essential Writings*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1979. Print.

discovery of the humanity and complexities of the unknown Other lies the possibilities for loving the unknown Other — should be read as a subtle polemic against racism. Wright continues his work of conceptualizing a transnational political solidarity against totalitarianism and oppression. It was in the process of travel that each of these writers was able to develop these techniques.

Chapter 2: Amsterdam

Black art raises questions on *becoming Human* rather than *assuming Human*. When the Black produces art from an intersection of performance and subjectivity, there is a palpable structure of feeling—a shared sense that violence and captivity are the grammar and ghost of every gesture.⁸⁵

Frank Wilderson III
in *Grammar & Ghost: The Performative Limits of African Freedom*

⁸⁵ Wilderson, Frank. "Grammar & Ghost: The Performative Limits of African Freedom." *Theatre Survey* 50:1 (May 2009)

Opening Notes:

This chapter is an extended narrative that moves among the conditions of Blackness and the locations of the Netherlands and the United States. In the chapter I do, and draw on, literary analysis, political theory, and Black studies. My main question is: Can I craft a narrative in which Dutch Caribbean migrants and Black American travelers can reside together? What tensions or discordant notes occur?

This chapter keeps within the theoretical framework of fugitivity in its focus on how Black Americans *flee* to Amsterdam as they escape from the difficulties of their existence in Blackness: writer Heather Neff left angry at mid-20th-century race relations in the US and discovered the writing of James Baldwin in a French bookstore. Decades later she wrote a tale of Abel, a Black American man who escapes to Amsterdam from the poverty, alcoholism, and personal despair that shaped his life in Harlem, New York. Musician Stew crafted the musical *Passing Strange* through channeling his personal experiences as a young Black American living in Europe seeking to evade the confines of middle-class Blackness. The theoretical framework of non-representational theory is also employed throughout the chapter as my “research data” is represented in non-traditional ways, such as literary travel accounts, as well as my theoretical engagement with the work of Deleuze and Guattari and locating the affective dimensions of the principal literature engaged.

I begin with a historical context (a flashback) based around Anton de Kom and the historical legacy of Dutch colonialism and enslavement. Anton de Kom not only traveled throughout the Caribbean, including an extended stay in Haiti, he was exiled in the Netherlands, away from his home in Suriname. I offer a brief reading of his most famous text *We Slaves of Suriname* that he completed while traveling in the years leading up to World War II amidst various national and colonial conflicts. From here I begin approaching the present, broadly engaging the post-colonial issues related to race and migration in the Netherlands and Europe.

My reading of Anton de Kom was catalyzed by my encounter with his statue in the center of the Bijlmermeer neighborhood. As Tim Ingold has noted,

...[a] landscape tells –or rather is– a story. It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their

part in its formation. To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past.⁸⁶

Dutch history surrounded me in the Bijlmermeer neighborhood, embodied in the Caribbean, African, and Indonesian migrants that populate the area. In order to understand the landscape of Amsterdam I grappled with the histories of colonialism and migrations that connect the country to the rest of the African diaspora through flows of capital, people, and culture. As I move to Black Americans traveling to Amsterdam with a close reading and analysis of my interview with Heather Neff and her novel *Haarlem*, we see the histories of Dutch Caribbeans and Black Americans intertwine as Abel, the main protagonist, falls in love with a Dutch woman. I then move into an engagement with the relationship between racism in the United States and the denial of racism in the Netherlands. I close the chapter with a discussion of the musical *Passing Strange* in which the protagonist, the African American *Youth*, travels to Amsterdam.

Throughout the chapter there are five brief “travel accounts” that reflect on my personal experiences traveling in the Netherlands last year.

⁸⁶ in “The Temporality of the Landscape” Tim Ingold *World Archaeology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Conceptions of Time and Ancient Society (Oct., 1993) , pp. 152-174.

Travel Account 1:

Somehow the conversation turned towards migration.

I made a comment about brain drain in Africa. Her brown face scrunched up, annoyed. “I hope migrants flood Europe’s borders, like when the levees broke.” She didn’t smile, tapping her sharpened, painted fingernails on the table melodically. She was serious, “I mean, they deserve it. You can’t just colonize a country and expect there to be no consequences after you give it freedom. What did they expect?” I didn’t respond, just slowly nodded, thinking about the dilemma posed by wanting a potentially better life in another country or staying planted in one’s home community. *It is frustratingly problematic that Black people are always expected to go home after the fact of colonization or enslavement, to go back to where they came from. Why do we continue to imagine and desire homogenous nations and communities when heterogeneity is the mark, the condition of modernity?* I kept those thoughts to myself, however, and asked if she was hungry. She was.

The weather was cool outside of the Schiphol airport in Amsterdam. There were various people milling around, some with luggage. Most wore scarves and jackets because of the crisp gusts of winds. I, mistakenly thinking that it would be warm in late May, was wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with a blue tiger, but I wore no hat. I tried to act visibly nonchalant about the situation but allowed my inner voice to yell, “I’m in Amsterdam!” I kept hearing the accents of groups of British lads and French girls who were arriving for unknown forthcoming adventures. I tried to quiet the small sense of disappointment I felt, knowing that I was alone on a research mission and not with friends on a backpacking tour. I wasn’t going to *Amsterdam Centraal* but was trying to find the *Bijlmermeer*, a suburb of Amsterdam with a visible and politically active migrant and Black community. This is still an adventure, I thought to myself, because I don’t even know where the Metro is. I soon realized that the Metro was inside the airport and made my way to the ticket counter. After explaining where I was trying to go, the receptionist inquired why I wanted to go there, “Oh, I read about it and it seemed cool,” I said admittedly vague, not really in an explanative mood, as I wanted to get on the next train. She looked at me incredulously but didn’t seem to care enough to press the issue. I paid, and got on the flat escalator down to the train platform. It was dense, an anticipating array of travelers with backpacks and iPhones, double-checking that they were on the correct side. I maintained my nonchalant stance waiting for the train. The train glided in smoothly, without the clattering sounds of steel and brakes and friction of New York City. I

boarded the quiet second floor of the train, and sat next to a young woman reading a local newspaper who kept stealing pensive glances at me. I asked her if she would let me know when we were near Bijlmermeer. “You’re American?” she responded, closing her newspaper, seemingly relieved that I had initiated the conversation. I explained that I was a university student and she then informed me about the recent urban renewal efforts in Bijlmermeer and agreed that it was a cool area. She got off the train at Amsterdam Centraal but left me with directions and an email address. Soon, thereafter, it was my turn to get off the train.

I arrived in Bijlmermeer in a state similar to that felt by Youth, the main character from the musical *Passing Strange* and Abel the protagonist from *Haarlem*: an excited, somewhat naïve, somewhat disillusioned African-American, clutching an idea of Amsterdam as socially liberal and progressive, unaware of the history that lay behind and beneath the city.

Part 1: Anton de Kom and Dutch Colonialism

In the central square of the Bijlmermeer neighborhood there is a large grey statue of a Black man emerging out of a slab of stone. He is shirtless and stands tall and proud. Stopping to look up at the statue, I found myself confronted with the history that lies beneath Bijlmermeer, Amsterdam, the Netherlands and the countries scattered around the world that are implicated in its history of colonialism and enslavement and exploitation of both natural and human resources. The presence of Black and Brown people in Bijlmermeer was not spontaneous, no more spontaneous than the association of the Bijlmermeer neighborhood with social problems like crime, drug use and poverty. When the construction of the original flats that still litter parts of the Bijlmermeer neighborhood was finished in the early 1970s, the buildings remained almost empty, as most Dutch residents did not appreciate the massive, monotone architecture of the high rises. As a result, rent prices dropped and the Bijlmermeer began to attract the underprivileged, particularly large numbers of immigrants from Suriname, which had become nominally independent in 1975. The Dutch government placed these immigrants in the now-affordable social housing in the Bijlmermeer. By the end of the 1980s the Bijlmermeer had the distinct profile of a poor Black neighborhood. The statue in the central square was a part of an ambitious urban revitalization project; since the 1990s, residents had

petitioned their *stadsdeel* or city district for the monument. In 2006, the statue of anticolonial activist and writer *Anton de Kom* was controversially inaugurated.

In our engagement with (fugitive) movement, –with flights and passages– in and through the Netherlands we shall begin with Anton de Kom and the history of Dutch colonialism and enslavement that shaped his life, as well as the lives of the people of Suriname, the Dutch Caribbean, and Indonesia, who later migrated to Netherlands towards the end of the 20th century. Thereafter, we will return to me looking up at the statue in a revitalized contemporary Bijlmermeer and explore the passages of African-Americans to Amsterdam.

Cornelis Gerard Anton de Kom was born in Suriname in 1898; his father was enslaved. A few decades previously the Netherlands had abolished slavery in Suriname and the Antilles and had begun decreasing its economic interests in the area while cultivating its explorations in the East Indies (Indonesia). When De Kom acquired work with a rubber company as a pay officer he learned of the meager salaries and dire working conditions of contract workers, mainly from Indonesia, imported to replace newly emancipated Africans. This exposure to the horrific and exploitative conditions faced by everyday workers pushed a twenty-year-old de Kom to associate with political activists and a workers union. In 1920 de Kom left Suriname and became a crewmember on one of the many cargo tankers that transported goods back and forth throughout the Caribbean. He got off in Haiti and spent three months talking and learning about the American occupation of that country, its correlations with Dutch colonialism in Suriname, and the *Universal Negro Improvement Association's* efforts in organizing sugar-cane workers in Haiti and nearby Cuba. The poverty he witnessed in Haiti, and its resemblance to his home, further shaped his political imagination. After leaving Haiti, de Kom arrived in the Netherlands where he found himself, like other young colonial immigrants, attracted towards the highly charged post-World War I political environment of Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam.

The Dutch authorities were always aware of De Kom's political activities and he was closely watched. After years in the Netherlands, during which he started a family with a Dutch woman, he returned to Suriname. He was banned from public speaking and followed persistently by police, forcing him to work with the local community clandestinely. De Kom received hundreds of

complaints from local Surinamese people about their sufferings, abuse and general repression by the Dutch authorities. Many of these people were Javanese and Hindustani who knew of his support for the Indonesian anticolonial struggle. In February of 1933 de Kom was arrested after being found responsible for a political demonstration of local workers. His arrest was an official attempt by the colonial authorities to curtail rising expectations by plantation workers that some kind of economic relief was possible through demonstrations. Jailed within the walls of the 300-year-old Fort Zeelandia, he expected to be released during the following week, but was not, and his continued imprisonment became the focal point for renewed demonstrations and demands.

In May of 1933, almost five months after his return to Suriname, de Kom and his family were forcibly exiled to Holland. De Kom survived four years of Nazi occupation until August of 1944 when he was arrested by the Nazi Gestapo and the Dutch Criminal Police. Classified as a political prisoner, de Kom was transferred to four different camps. In early April 1945, he was transferred to Sandbostel. It was not clear whether he died from sickness, was murdered by the guards during the few remaining days of the war, or somehow escaped. It was not until 1960, using de Kom's dental records and skull measurements, that a team of medical examiners made a positive identification of his remains that were found in a mass grave containing 1,600 prisoners killed by the Germans two weeks before the end of the war. His remains were later interred at a national military cemetery in Loenen, Holland, his native home of Suriname an ocean away.

Anton de Kom's life, composed of passages backwards and forwards, returns and departures, displays how a being-towards-freedom through movement is not linear, or without upset but is complicated and moves fugitively through not only the concerns of Suriname against colonialism but broader global processes. While de Kom was exiled in Holland during Nazi occupation, American military forces occupied Suriname and exploited the country's resources of bauxite. His travels in Haiti implicated him in the burgeoning Pan-African anti-colonial and anti-imperial political and cultural ideas that worked to shape his consciousness and he wrote his most famous piece during his time abroad, *We Slaves of Suriname*, published in 1934. de Kom worked to articulate an anti-colonial position that connected the various ethnic groups of Suriname into one nationalist bloc, writing,

Perhaps I shall succeed in driving it home to Negroes and Hindustanis, to Javanese

and Amerindians, that only solidarity can unite all the sons of mother Sranan in their struggle for a life worthy of man's dignity.

We Slaves of Suriname works on the level of consciousness and imagination, a way of freeing the mind of oppressive colonial ideals, what de Kom called a “deeply rooted inferiority complex”, in which one was not just liberated materially, but ideologically and culturally as well, mirroring the works and ideas of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral. *We Slaves of Suriname* is an aesthetical lacing of a sociopolitical critique, an articulation of de Kom’s anticolonial position that is grounded in his love for his home country, the beauty of the natural world that is being destroyed by the mechanisms of exploitation and capital accumulation, and his commitment to the practice of rememory.

Memory is evident in the work as de Kom details how he apprehended the misery of enslavement through his grandmother’s eyes as she told stories of her experiences to him as a child. Further, he remembers how as a young boy he told his mother of his sorrows which helped to alleviate some of the pain he experienced, and uses this memory to craft a method of surreptitiously working with community members, writing,

And suddenly I have it; I shall open an advice bureau and listen to the complaints of my comrades, as Mother once listened to the sorrows of her small boy.

[...]

Under the tree, however, there is a procession of misery past my little table, pariahs with hollow cheeks, starvelings, men without much resistance, open books in which you can read the laboriously told story of oppression and deprivation. Amerindians, "bush negroes," Creoles, Hindus, Javanese; there were days when more than fifteen hundred appeared at my table, some of whom had travelled seven to eight days in order to speak to me, while police motorcycles rode back and forth outside in the street.

The vocabulary of the radical organizations de Kom engaged with while abroad sneaks into his passages as he speaks of comrades and proletariats, yet his ornate, imaginative descriptions shine through and work subversively. He uses beautiful language to describe his home Suriname, where “the air is heavy with the scent of honeysuckle” and then he slides the beauty aside to describe deplorable conditions of suffering, in an intricate, aureate passage that awakens and shakes the reader:

Suriname is the country of flowers. Red wounds flower on black bodies, so like the *fajalobi*, the flowers young lovers give to each other as a token of their passion. Like the *angalampoe*, the red lamp of misery hangs in front of the house of the poor. Among the flowering *cannas* and the scented *popokaitongos*, filariasis and leprosy blossom as well. [...] Black calloused hands grasp heavy axes; titans of timber are felled; the land is ripped open. Soon, the whites' new coffee plantations, built with government subsidies, will be ready. Meanwhile, if the lumberjacks are injured, there is no one to tend them. There are leg wounds, so large and deep that you can easily turn a fist in them; gaping holes surrounded by raw flesh, black feet so swollen that they are completely deformed. The stench from such wounds is unbearable to the others in the hut. Amidst the glorious flora and fauna of the primeval forest, a worker dies.

Striking and considered, this passage engages the experiences and memories of Black flesh, of Black bodies that have often been forgotten, neglected, forsaken, exploited, and replaced. He draws on the senses as he conveys the sight of wounds and fauna, the *touch* of fists in wounds, the *smell* of injured flesh and blooming flowers, the *taste* of the secretions that sits at the very tip of tongues, sighs and cries that one can *hear* comingling into a glossolalia in the moist, permeated air. This passage combines the abject with the beautiful. The inhabitants of the 'primeval forest' sit shakily at the cusp of life and death, and the sensuous dimensions that animate the forest display a predilection for life, as the death of the worker becomes all the more nonsensical amidst the array of natural beauty. Black is coupled with hurt and vulnerability and is multiplicity: 'black calloused', 'black bodies', 'black feet', while the sole mention of white is coupled with ownership and new. In coupling white with ownership, and with new, pristine in the middle of a paragraph detailing hurt, de Kom shifts the abject. The abject are the taboo elements of the self that are normally quarantined off in a liminal space, cast aside and disavowed, –the white creation of the abject black provoked the necessity for the creation of encampment, ghettos and camps–. Yet in de Kom's passage suffering blackness surrounds the new coffee plantation, its pristineness is muddied and bloodied by the gaping dripping wounds of an axe wielding timber man. The new coffee plantation is announced as a break in the narration of misery, as a momentary, ironical lapse in which the product of labor is directly tied to the laborers who no longer are concealed out of view in the forests, the stench spreading to the outside of their liminal space.

De Kom does not allow the reader to be a passive witness to the misery, to the laborers' excursion outside, but pulls the reader's fist into the gaping wounds with the sole mention of "you", bringing

“you” inside the forest, “you” are no longer outside the text. When he sends the amputated swollen feet into “you”, the reader’s consciousness, he sends the text outside into the real world where it truly belongs, where it was born, where flesh resides, as he waves fans to push the stench. The reality that he encapsulates in the text is, was, is real, it lived and died, Blackness lived, colonialism happened, Blackness smelled and bled, Blackness lived, Blackness hurt, Blackness died and it was only preserved and conveyed through the poetic fossilization, –for fossils were once bodies–, of memory and experience. The assault on the Black bodies is made parallel to the ripping open of the earth, the ground, the soil, the dirt from which we sprang and to which we return, and that which is assaulted and brutalized to make way for a new planation, a repository for enslavement, displaying the delicate ecology that interconnects the bodies of humans and the earth. This ecology has been made precarious for capital and development are violent and deadly. The “glorious flora and fauna” becomes dying flowers; perhaps an indication of an uncaring universe that will continue to grow and blossom as human life perishes out of its own capital inclined hubris until all of the earth is ripped open and flowers no longer bloom.

De Kom’s writing displays a stance of Camus’ “I rebel therefore *we* are” as he reduces his self’s importance for the good of the collective, a stance of solidarity instead of solitude, as he writes:

When I think of my murdered comrades, of the wounded and the maimed, of the poverty and dire need, then my own personal misfortune seems almost trivial by comparison. The cell crawling with vermin, the torment of interrogation followed upon interrogation [...] my return to Holland [...] all these are scarcely worth mentioning, and I do so only as further proof of the injustice and arbitrary rule that continue to hold sway in Suriname.

De Kom remains optimistic, at times, in the narrative, and his anticolonial fervor is fueled by the murdered and maimed that illustrate how imperative the struggle is. He writes, with an unrelenting love for Suriname that, “I hope to see you again once more. On the day when all your misery has been expunged once and for all.” It is difficult to discern whether that day of freedom from misery ever arrived. Suriname assumed independence in 1975, during which about 50,000 left the country for the Netherlands fearing the ethnic violence that shook neighboring Guyana. The presence of those 50,000 migrants in the Netherlands provoked a further outcry to provide the country independence in hopes that sovereignty would stop further migration. In 1974, for instance, the

Elsevier newspaper ran the headline: "Stop the Bijlmer express!" Most Dutch citizens assumed that Suriname was less socioeconomically developed and that consequently the migrants would lack educational and vocational skills and put strain on the labor market. Further, as Paul Gilroy importantly notes, the factor of racism *preceded* and problematized migration. Since independence the country has been constantly involved in internal political struggles over its future direction. Between 1979-1980 another 30,000 left the country for the Netherlands, which is a significant number in relation to the country's total population of 400,000. Many have characterized the large migratory departure from Suriname as an exodus. As the new country struggled amidst corruption and chaos that seem to have been torn out of the pages that details the problems of postcolonial consciousness in the *Wretched of the Earth*, a military officer, Desi Bouterse, seized power and precipitated increased violence when in December 1982 his regime executed 15 political opponents. This culminated in civil war in the late 1980s. Currently, more than 335,000 people of Surinamese origin are living in the Netherlands.

Part 2: Presence and Absence and Movement and Blackness

If one were to broadly consider the manifestations of Blackness in the United States as opposed to Europe, one would note that in the US there was *always* the presence of Blackness. In the US, the colony existed inside of the State; the problem of race and the color line was directly manifested in communities and cities where Blackness and Whiteness existed together despite the implementation of racialized spatial apartheid and disenfranchisement. Blackness constituted the United States and the United States constituted Blackness; the existence of each was dependent upon and shaped by the other—as Saidiya Hartman has phrased it: Blackness "literally lives inside the order".⁸⁷ While for Europe, at least Western Europe, because the colonies existed overseas Blackness could be said, by both the European and African nationalists, the purists, to be found *outside* of the geopolitical boundaries of the idea of Europe. Europe was then able to maintain its purported sense of homogeneity, to deploy that homogeneity, that whiteness, as traditional and thus sacred, making it unquestionable that the European is white. The accommodation and politicization of Blackness in the United States was shaped by its proximity to whiteness and claims of Black Nationalism or separatism were often suppressed by claims for a shared redefined American citizenship. Whereas it

⁸⁷ Hartman, Saidiya V., and Frank Wilderson, III. "The Position Of The Unthought." *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 183-201. JSTOR. Web. Apr. 2014.

was not the politicization of Blackness that de Kom articulated but a politicization of the Surinamese, or of the Jamaican, the Haitian, in nationalist cries for control of the State; one could say that the Black American never wanted to control the State but wanted a) the right to exist and b) the right to exist within the State. As Frans Timmermans, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands, has stated, European countries have no precedent, no intrinsic method for dealing with difference. Looking at the 20th century history of Black Europe, there is a striking resemblance to the Black American experience as European countries have sectioned off immigrants in segregated areas; implemented social and political policies that either disregard the presence of difference or are directly detrimental to those communities; immigrant communities, especially Black, have been criminalized and stereotyped as degenerate and dangerous as well been baldly misrepresented and dehumanized in popular culture artifacts such as films and advertisements. In response to these various sociopolitical and cultural acts of anti-Blackness, Blackness, as a politicized, radical way of being, sprang into existence, and individuals and communities in the Netherlands are working to address and alleviate the array of issues that are detrimental and challenge their ability to be and remain full citizens and human beings.

We can think of the relationship between whiteness and Blackness, between the State and former colonies as inter-connected assemblages composed of discrete factors that are grouped together. Deleuze and Guattari have discussed how the process of becoming is when one piece of the assemblage, such as Blackness or the former colony, is drawn into or moves into the territory of another piece of the assemblage. That movement changes its value as element, a new type of unity and relationship is formed within the assemblage. Blackness has always been in a process of becoming as it works to radically change its relationship to whiteness, the State, and Society. In that process of becoming, of Blackness moving from its territory under apartheid into the domain of whiteness, there has been immense friction—the force that resists the relational motion of material elements sliding against each other. The movement of Blackness in the assemblage it shares with whiteness is unlike the movement of the elements of a cell in which all are working together towards a shared goal. Instead there are opposing goals, perhaps even anti-Black goals that cause friction against the movement of Blackness. The friction that is occurring as Blackness moves into Europe can be alleviated through struggle.

Travel Account 2:

“Have you heard about the boatload of African migrants that drowned off the coast of Italy?” I was checking the news when I saw the headline earlier that morning. The death toll was already in the hundreds and continued to rise. I did not want to imagine the desperation they must have felt to risk traveling in such a packed boat; I did not want to imagine hundreds of bodies floating in the water. I could not help but to imagine both. “No,” she responded quickly, her brow furrowed, “that’s terrible. Where were they from?” “Mainly North Africa,” I said quietly. “I don’t know what I would do if I was in European government. How do you accommodate thousands of migrants and refugees?” Even though I posed hypotheticals I wasn’t really interested in the politics of the matter, I was still shocked by the human cost and how there were no right answers. African countries, hell, the world, will remain in a state of chaos as long as they have resources to exploit. It was quiet for a moment, both of us lost in our thoughts but desiring each other’s presence. “We’re still drowning, yo.” I said, finally, half out loud, half thinking to myself. “What do you mean?” she turned to face me crooking her head the way people do when they’re both interested in and skeptical of you at the same time. “Black people. We’re still drowning...” she opened her mouth but I continued, “You know how people always talk about the Africans thrown overboard slave ships, or the ones who jumped? People are always talking about us drowning as if it’s this far away history that we have to look back on in order to appreciate how far we’ve come. Black people are still drowning, yo, we’re still being thrown off ships. No one is talking about what’s really happening to Black people in Africa, in the Americas, or Europe, at least not in the States—we’re just grinning at Obama.” This time she was quiet and just nodded, muttering, “It’s messed up.”

Friction and Inertia: Art in the Struggle Against

The movement of migrants into Europe is being met with opposition due to the attempted inertia—the resistance of any physical object to any change in its state of motion—of nationalism, xenophobia, and post-colonial malaise. Nationalism in European countries has come to be entangled with racism because of the historical legacy of colonial and imperial dominance and eventual resistance. As a result, Paul Gilroy has noted, the figure of the migrant, particularly the Black migrant, wears a badge of second-class citizenry and marginality, an archaic legacy of the 20th century. Gilroy argues that Black migrants must come to be seen as Black Europeans and the mythical intertwining of whiteness and nationalism and tradition must be unwrapped and dismantled in order to articulate the material and immaterial legacies of Europe’s colonial past in a way that does

not excuse the violence and hostility that migrants continue to experience. Black Europeans in the Netherlands, as well as in countries throughout Western Europe, are working independently and collectively towards rearticulating and reimagining what it means to be European, while Black, a being over-determined by multiple traditions, languages, and experiences, all while advocating for the rights for diverse individuals to exist in Europe with the rights and privileges of franchised citizens. In thinking about how Black Europeans are rearticulating European identity as well as advocating for the rights of migrant communities, we can turn to a performance artist who is deploying art and embodiment as a means of resistance, using art as a translated friction that works against nationalism tinged with xenophobia and racism. Connecting art—the visual, aesthetical, and creative—with embodiment—the corporeal, the felt and experienced—allows one to connect the mental and physical process of knowing and understanding. Performance art engages the meanings of the conditions and experiences of the world by deliberately pushing the limits of norms that maintain problematic status quos, by ignoring boundaries, making private spaces public, or bringing the private into the public, performance art can behave as if it is inside while outside. Performance art can encompass text, audio, and visuality as it weaves together various sensuous manifolds of the viewer. Art's visuality, its imaging, is loaded with meanings, histories, lives, and bodies that exceed the boundaries of the frame because these meanings cannot be fully contained within the frame. The image is connected to the outside, to the problems and lives of the real world that the artist wishes to address.

The material presence of performance art appeals to the senses, and potentially fires off and stimulates new ideas, allowing the viewer to consider new experiences, new ways of being, that can potentially lead to the production of new meanings, new ways of understanding the components of the world. Art that conjoins senses, emotions and perception, as the artist translates life—sensation, touch, smell, taste, breath, feeling, moisture, awkwardness, hurts, comfort—into poetics. This is why art reminds us of life as we associate it with our thoughts and understandings provoked by our everyday experiencing of the world. In the artist's funneling of life into image and the viewer's connection of the meanings that have pored from that image back into life is where old ideas can be reimagined. Art moves and through movement comes change and transformation. As Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, creating a line of flight does not mean to flee but to re-create or re-act against

dominant systems of thought and social conditions; it is to think beyond, away, to re-new. They maintain that a “line of flight” ‘never consist[s] in running away from the world but rather in causing runoffs...’⁸⁸ as we see with performance artist, Musa Okwonga, a poet and journalist based in the UK whose performance art combines poetics with visuality and acoustics to add an addendum of emotionality to his piece with the Migrants’ Rights Network, a non-governmental organization based in the UK.

Travel Account 3

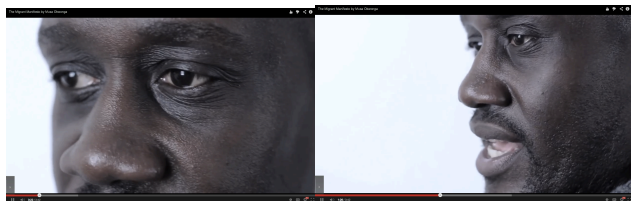
Watching Okwonga’s performance of ‘The Migrant Manifesto’ in a digital video.

The video begins with a close-up on Okwonga’s lower face, the white background made stark in contrast to his rich complexion. The video is minimalistic, both in positioning Okwonga against the bright background, and in Okwonga’s even, reserved speech, that is forceful but never loud, annunciated but never thrust or spate at the viewer, as the words seem to gradually flow from his mouth. He begins,

We have been called many names.

Illegals. Aliens. Guest Workers. Border crossers. Undesirables. Exiles. Criminals.
Non-citizens. Terrorists. Thieves. Foreigners. Invaders. Undocumented.

There is a slight pause before calling upon the names, as he channels Toni Morrison and James Baldwin and Hortense Spillers and others who have spoken and wrote about the evacuation of our names, of the false names that have been layered upon us. Okwonga does not convey hurt as he utters the epithets, yet they seem to taste bad as he embodies and releases the words of the nationalists and xenophobes. He calls upon the humans those names represent, the humans who remain vulnerable because of those names, the humans who are more than those names. His uttering of the names does not seek to blame or identify the culprit.



The camera shifts between a zoomed out focus on Okwonga’s entire face and the top half of his body. Okwonga’s grey sweater fits with the minimalism that relies only on the contrasting hues of the glowing white background. He continues reciting the Migrants’ Manifesto. Below is a sampling from the ten tenets:

⁸⁸ Felix Guattari and Giles Deleuze “Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium

1. We know that international connectivity is the reality that migrants have helped create, it is the place where we all reside. We understand that the quality of life of a person in a country is contingent on migrants' work. We identify as part of the engine of change.
8. We are convinced that the functionality of international borders should be re-imagined in the service of humanity.
9. We understand the need to revive the concept of the commons, of the earth as a space that everyone has the right to access and enjoy.
10. We witness how fear creates boundaries, how boundaries create hate and how hate only serves the oppressors. We understand that migrants and non-migrants are interconnected. When the rights of migrants are denied the rights of citizens are at risk.

The unwavering annunciation of the tenets of the manifesto echoes the speech acts of historic manifestos that have presented truths that were taken to be 'self-evident' and legitimate by virtue of their very utterance in the name of the collective. Subtlety is what makes the manifesto, the collective that stands with Okwongo, strong. In Okwongo's utterances, in his embodiment, his standing in for the collective, the tenets of the manifesto acquire legitimacy by virtue of his Black masculine body and the emotionality presented in the video. That is, the tenets are legitimate not solely because of the words and meanings that are to be found within the manifesto but because of the way in which Okwonga utters them, his precise, clear, educated English, his performance of conservatism, his dual pulling of vulnerability and strength, understated yet channeling the history of Black male annunciators from rap stars to politicians who speaks truths that are true just because they, specifically, have spoken them, as with the expression "Because I said so."

Part 3: Heather Neff's *Haarlem*

Standing in the central square of the Bijlmermeer looking up at the statue of Anton de Kom as people milled around me, walking to and fro, I blended into the background as a young Black man in one of the most diverse areas of the city. My American nationality was not visible until I spoke, the difference between my route and the route of the migrants was not apparent until I uttered in American English and then was the trajectory and capital of my journey exposed to the listener. As I realized at the Schiphol airport, people arrived in Amsterdam from all over the world for a multitude of reasons, some on journeys towards business, or education, towards respite, even love, however fleeting that love might be. As Anaïs Nin, a Spanish-Cuban American writer raised in France, has

poignantly expressed, “We travel, some of us forever, to seek other states, other lives, other souls.” Sometimes, those lives and souls that we travel in search of are our own, and that search for the self is often the most difficult for the self is evasive and amorphous. Sometimes, we travel in search of the lives and souls of others, as we wander in search of a connection, skin upon skin, eyes fixated on other eyes, or as Emmanuel Lévinas would say “face-to-face”, in search of a moment, in which we abandon our concerns and complexes and fears and worries, forget that “the world waited outside, [and that] trouble stretched above us”⁸⁹ as we search for a particle of quiet that is somehow disconnected from the overflowing streams of capital and information and gratuitous violence that saturates our everyday lives. We travel, it can be said, to escape the burden of capitalism as that ‘we’ shifts to ‘Americans’, Americans who travel in a search of what is beyond work and competition, Americans who travel in hopes of feeling more human, more in tuned with the other people, beings, and things which inhabit this planet in way that goes beyond imperialism and conquest; we travel with dreams, perhaps unrealizable, of finding a way of living that is not predicated on annihilation and Americanization. Perhaps, this assigns a more transcendent, existential purpose to the traveler from the overdeveloped country and a more grounded, basal purpose of travel to the postcolonial migrant who moves in search of economic and political stability.⁹⁰ But the existential quest of the American is that of the migrant and the socioeconomic quest of the migrant is that of the American, as both are caught up in the attempt of escape from the tumultuous reality that has come to characterize contemporary life, as both are seeking a moment of respite from residing in the heart and chambers (colonies) of capitalism. Travel is feeling one’s way around, eyes adjusting to sudden brightness, hands recoiling from the surprise of touch, tension easing, blood flowing, air exchanging, as one begins to trust again.

Decades before I landed in Schiphol airport, another Black American had landed there. It was winter, and looking out of the window of her plane Heather Neff saw a snowy, and grey, and beautiful Amsterdam. Neff decided to write a book based on Amsterdam after looking out of the plane’s window. Years later, in 2005, she published *Haarlem*, a chronicle of the journey of Abel, a

⁸⁹ James Baldwin “Sonny’s Blues”

⁹⁰ Overdeveloped refers to a way of seeing global inequality that focuses on the negative consequences of excessive consumption in Western imperial countries such as the United States.

native son of Harlem, to Amsterdam in search of his Dutch mother and an escape from the addiction and darkness that defined his life as a Black man in America. Heather Neff transplanted the story of her postgraduate departure from the United States for Europe where she discovered the writings of James Baldwin—specifically “Sonny’s Blues”—that would come to influence the story of *Haarlem*.⁹¹

I discovered *Haarlem* in a church basement in Detroit. Browsing along the racks of romance novels and history books of white America, my interest was piqued by the odd spelling of Harlem and the face on the cover of a brown-skinned man, with a low haircut, slight bags under his eyes and the beginnings of a five o’clock shadow on his face. I felt butterflies in my stomach when I realized that the novel chronicled the fictional journey of Abel Crofton, a New York tunnel worker, as he “explores the streets and canals of Amsterdam.” “*This is exactly what I’ve been looking for,*” I thought to myself as I connected the novel to my then burgeoning thesis project on Black travel writing. I purchased the book and read it in one sitting as I sought to evaluate whether it would work for my project. My hopes were not only satisfied when I saw that the book was peppered with references to Chester Himes, Ishmael Reed, James Baldwin, and W.E.B. Dubois but also when I read Heather Neff’s foreword to the novel in which she reminisces on purchasing a “tattered copy of James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* in a used bookstore on the Rue La Fayette in Paris” and of leaving the United States at twenty-two years old, the same age as I, “filled with a deep and inarticulate sadness about our nation’s continuing racial strife.” In writing *Haarlem*, Neff was “like Baldwin” and “moved to examine the terrible forms of self-destruction that haunt our communities—perhaps in response to our continuing rage at being, as Baldwin put it, “the disesteemed.” Reading the words of a fellow Baldwin lover who grew up in Detroit and found her self compelled to leave the United States, I became captivated and sought to converse with Dr. Neff.

As with most interviews, the questions I prepared provided only a foundation for a conversation that strayed beyond the confines of the queries into terrains unforeseen and illuminating as the words, ideas, and experiences of the effervescent and intellectually rich Heather Neff and myself

⁹¹ Neff, Heather. *Haarlem: A Novel*. New York: Harlem/Broadway, 2005. Print.

collided into and meshed with each other, producing something unexpected. Neff was born in 1957 in Akron, Ohio to an Episcopal clergyman and a classical pianist and her family integrated an all-white suburb of Akron in 1964. In 1970 she moved to Detroit and eventually became a student at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor where she studied English literature. Neff explained that while she was a student at the University of Michigan she began to question her religious upbringing, as did Baldwin, and often felt anger at both the state of race relations in the US and the lack of understanding possessed by her white classmates and instructors. This anger and her budding personal transformations guided her departure from the United States into Paris and later Switzerland, where she completed her doctoral degree. In completing her masters in Paris, Neff wrote her thesis on the “many exiles of James Baldwin” entitled “The Rage Of The Disesteemed”, and she admits that there were aspects of Baldwin, and his writing, that she did not fully understand in her first reading *The Fire Next Time* at 23, although it did change her “inutterably”, a term that she borrows from Baldwin. The condition of the disesteemed is rage, a smoldering pilot light that is waiting for ignition, a rage that Baldwin experienced in Switzerland as he realized that even the illiterate of the village were related to Dante and Aeschylus in a way that he was not, for he “was in Africa waiting for the conquerors to arrive.” Neff states that in *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin identified “the anger I felt toward my father (who was an Episcopal priest) and the moral narrowness of the community in which I was raised.” This anger became further elucidated when she read Du Bois *Souls of Black Folk* while working on her master’s thesis. Neff states:

When I got to the paragraph about "double consciousness" in the first chapter of THE SOULS...it all made sense. At last I understood the source of my own rage toward my country, American culture, whiteness, the education system, and even myself. I knew that Baldwin had read Du Bois and experienced his own liberation.

Here we have a genealogy of thought and consciousness that moves from the histories of colonialism and enslavement and the creation of race and Blackness, to Du Bois to Baldwin, to Neff, to myself, and now to you, the reader. This genealogy charts the rage over the violent conditions imposed upon Blackness, conditions that repeat themselves generation after generation. It charts the words and ideas trying to make sense of that rage. It charts the efforts to launch individual rage into a movement against the institutions and structures responsible for the conditions wrapped like chains around the very idea of Blackness.

Baldwin found that the rage of the disesteemed is “personally fruitless, but it is also absolutely inevitable” for “no black [wo]man can hope ever to be entirely liberated from this internal warfare – rage, dissembling, and contempt having inevitably accompanied [her] his first realization of the power of white men.” Going beyond the typographical addendum of gendered pronouns to Baldwin’s words, Neff’s life is a material addendum that illustrates that the rage of the disesteemed doubly conscious subject seethed without regard to gender. The relationship between that rage and travel—departure, flight—is multiple: for travel can be an attempt to escape that inevitable rage, it can be the necessary condition to encounter that rage, even to realize that one was angry, and to work to understand it. Travel can be the means to begin healing that rage, to live beyond it, even if one cannot ever entirely escape it. Although that rage is broadly connected to antagonistic race relations and anti-Black racism, it can become solidified into a single person or object, as Neff’s rage spread to her father and religion before spreading out into other entities. Baldwin’s rage was often at a whiteness that chose to remain white no matter how much violence it caused, at the silent, unforgiving universe, and the arbitrary, non-negotiable demands and realities bequeathed to us, the ‘relatively conscious’, by history. Baldwin characterizes this rage as “internal warfare”, a civil war between the self and Blackness, and it would seem that the artist would be most aptly prepared to fight such an internal warfare for the artist, Baldwin writes, “must actively cultivate that state which most [wo]men, necessarily, must avoid: the state of being alone”. In this state of being alone, as were Neff, Baldwin, Abel, and countless other Black travelers when they left the United States, one can begin undoing the “dissembling”, the concealing of one’s true motives, feelings, and beliefs in hopes of recognizing and embracing the rage and other emotions that Blackness is laden with in hopes of recognizing how they are not aberrations or signs of a defective self, but part of a larger order that exists beyond you or me. Perhaps it is correct that this rage, these emotions, this Blackness, are not wholly escapable for, as Deleuze reminds us, “All social systems present lines of escape; and just as well hardenings that block the escapes”—for the self is trapped in a body that is trapped in a world—Deleuze seems to concede to Baldwin as he continues, “there remain apparatuses - no

matter how embryonic - that integrate the lines of escape, that deviate from them, arrest them, congealing them into the new system in preparation."⁹²

Travel Account 4:

I ran back to the apartment that night. Out of breath, sweating, my heart rate accelerated. I ran from the Metro station to my apartment. Perhaps I was still nervous from that night in South Africa two years ago when I was chased by a truckload of Colored men in Cape Town for no clear reason, or that time in Detroit.... Running was an instantaneous decision that I barely thought about, it just happened. *Running* I came up the stairs of the Metro and saw the groups of African guys that hang out the Metro stop. *Running* It was way past midnight and I was the only one coming out the stop, no one spoke to me, just turned and watched me, I didn't think about speaking to them, I didn't think about anything except getting to the apartment. *Running* I turned the corner into the side street I walked through to get to the main street and just started *running*, crossing the street, turning the corners, landing at the gate. I swiped my key card, walked in, and pressed my back against the wet other side of the gate. I sighed and saw my breath. I didn't even realize it was chilly out.

Reading the list of train stops, I saw that *Haarlem* was on the route I was on as I traveled from the Bijlmermeer to Amsterdam Centraal. Even though I did not have time to venture to Haarlem, the central location of Neff's novel, I imagined what it was like and wondered whether residents of Harlem in the US were aware they were indebted to a European suburb for their borough's name, as I had never deeply considered the Dutch origins of New York City, just as I often forget that the name of my hometown, Detroit, is of French origin. Origins are often a question, not a fact, an awaiting discovery. The question of origins, of beginnings, for objects is often relegated to trivial popular culture history, but the question of origins for humans and ideas is fundamental, ontological—for it concerns the nature and the source of being, becoming, existence and reality. For Blacks dehumanized into objecthood, origins were a non-question as Blackness was made into an ontological void as the enslaved were natally alienated, cut off from kinship ties and conceptualized as property as part slavery's "relation of domination," in which,

⁹² Felix Guattari and Giles Deleuze "Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium

Slaveholders annihilated people socially by first extracting them from meaningful relationships that defined personal status and belonging, communal memory, and collective aspiration and then incorporating these socially dead persons into the masters' world.⁹³

In emerging from disenfranchised objecthood into personhood and limited, contested citizenship, kinship and the question of origins for Blacks remained precarious and fragile, for both were still negatively affected by structural racism—e.g. violence, mass incarceration, urbanization and ghettoization, and social welfare policies—as well as an ambivalent relationship to an Africa mutilated by colonialism and resource exploitation. Thus, when Abel Crofton, the protagonist, crouches beside his dying father, Louis Franklin Crofton—“one of the biggest motherfuckers of all time”—who gave him his “addiction to alcohol and ...love of jazz”, Abel’s central, most pressing question regards his origins, his mother, stating,

“Pop” I whispered, daring myself to do what forty-five years on earth hadn’t given me the guts to do. “Pop- do you know where she is?”

...

“I don’t give a shit where she’s at”

“I—I need to find her”

“She don’t want you.”

“Pop, if you know, please tell me,” I said, strangling on the respect I was giving him. [...] “At least tell me her name.”

“She don’t have no name”

...

Finally I stood up. My anger felt like lead in the soles of my shoes. I stood looking down on the mummified figure until I realized he was no longer breathing. Suddenly I was jolted awake by the voice of the captain notifying the passengers that we were beginning our descent into Amsterdam’s Schiphol International Airport.

(7-8)

⁹³ Vincent Brown “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery” *American Historical Review* (1233) December 2009

Abel's question of origins departs from the now familiar narrative of the flawed Black man or woman searching for an absent father, and instead provokes thought of a narrative rooted more deeply in history: the mother who is absent and nameless because of the institution of enslavement, as expressed in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In locating Abel's maternal origins in the Netherlands, Neff exposes a European branch of the African diaspora, complicating the idea that origins, the motherland, must always be the African continent. The death of his father freed Abel, made his departure possible, allowing him to seek out answers that he had yet to implore during his forty-five years of life. His father's death is rather akin to the Camusian notion of the 'death of God', the death of the higher authority that typically curtails the possibilities for human freedom, a similarity that Abel's Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, Serge, complicates, stating, "Just because you hate your father doesn't mean you have to hate God...." (5)

Arriving in Amsterdam, Abel attempts to understand how the people around him in this foreign country understood his interiority when looking at his exteriority,

For a long, cool moment he looked in my eyes and I wondered what this white man saw: A drunk? A tunnel worker? A Black man who had no right to be here?

"Enjoy your stay," he said, snapping my passport shut and nodding me through the gate. (8)

In Amsterdam, who Abel is back home is not etched upon his skin, not readily apparent to the superficial observer. With such, Abel experiences a moment of freedom, a moment of freedom from who he is in America, as his first encounter defies the antagonistic relations he has been habituated to. Abel's travel to Amsterdam was years in the making, as he collected photographs of the city as a child and he finds the city to be more beautiful than he anticipated. From the airport Abel moves into his place of rest, a small hotel. As the city unfolds around him from the window of a taxi cab his thoughts stray back to New York City as he calibrates the differences between the two, describing "There I stood, my New Yorker's eyes struggling to look at a skyline with no skyscrapers, my soul terrorized by a city with no sound" (12). After a brief lapse in his hotel room, Abel finds himself in a *café*, where he finds the waitress with "ginger skin, black eyes and a curly-nappy deep brown 'fro." (13) The two enter into a conversation that smoothly glides along because of the

worldliness of the waitress, who easily recognizes that Abel is in Amsterdam searching for a relative, explaining, "You know, Amsterdam has always been a city of escape. Many people arrive here from all over the world. So many other people come here to find them." When the waitress guesses correctly that Abel has Dutch blood, she sends his consciousness back to Harlem to a childhood where everyone ridiculed his biblical name except his grandmother, who cleaned white people's homes for forty years and hoped that he would grow up to be a better man than his father. The waitress's name is eventually revealed to be Sophia, and Sophia reluctantly accompanies Abel to his first visit to Registry to begin looking for his mother, an awaiting discovery that he "had no damn idea what she looked like, where she lived, or what the hell happened to her after my father took off." (24) Walking back to his hotel, Abel moves along a sensuous paths of "fine rain", the smell of "French fries at a sidewalk stand" and soon his memories are triggered as John Coltrane's 'Greensleeves' "started playing in my head" and his consciousness flies back to Harlem. (25).

Abel learned to drink at thirteen, in Harlem, where he learned "that fading into the crowd was the best way to survive". He details how drinking transformed him, how his "walk turned into a glide; my syllables slurred into a kind of hip urban speech, and my lids grew heavy and menacing." (26-27) Drinking was a line of escape—what Deleuze calls a "drug-escape" that is often disconnected from the revolutionary plateau—for, Serge explains, "a drunk is nothing but an escape artist. He uses the bottle to hide from all the pressures of life." (32) Thus, all lines of escape do not carry a radical impulse, some lines of escape only appear to be a way out, but they more accurately push one further back into the beast, drowning and sedating one, suppressing one's desire to be freer, so that one's stasis, one's inability to escape, is only realized when one wakes up and begins to shake off the hypnosis of inebriation, an inebriation that is not only the consequence of alcoholism, but other false means of escape, such as consumerism. In Harlem, Abel worked as a tunnel worker, beneath ground in the darkness, a darkness that Neff likely transmits from Baldwin who wrote, in "Sonny's Blues," of the darkness of the lives of the young men who eventually turn to substance abuse. In recounting a memory of a conversation between himself and Serge days before he left for Amsterdam, Abel notes how Serge cautioned him about going to "a different country, where they

don't speak English, to try to find a women who may not be alive. Who may not have told anybody that she has a son in America. A Black son, at that." (49) Abel is aware of the possible risks involved in traveling to Amsterdam, but remains committed to going. Serge then suggests that he transform, that he shed his working class attire and way of being, stating:

"Before you get on that plane you've got to get some new rags, my friend."

I looked down at my insulated overalls and scuffed boots. "Don't think my mama will want her working-class son?"

"It's those greaseballs at immigration I'm worried about [...] And one other thing—" "You got to clean up your act and talk like you've got some education when you get there."

"You mean I can't show them my true self?"

"That's something neither one of us can ever afford to do." (50)

This passage engages both race and socioeconomic class, as the white Serge articulates a type of respectability politics with the intention of helping Abel avoid government administration, and, implicitly, violence. The mention of a true self is interesting coming from Neff who spoke during the interview of her admiration of the existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and noted that she does not agree with the idea of a complete, authentic self. Abel's mention of a true self, a notion that seems to gesture towards an idealized interior or core, seems to be facetious—for, Abel admits, "I never shared with anyone—not even Serge—what I *really* felt." (61) Where does that true self lie: beyond or within the drunk and the womanizer? Or is it the man he could have been, the man that he is, or the man that he is becoming? How can dynamic, aging beings—for whom stasis is only a temporary allusion—ever delimit the boundaries of a true self? In the passage the idea of the self is not cast in existentialist terms of authenticity, freedom, or living in bad faith, but in economic terms as Serge ominously suggests that neither he nor Abel can ever afford to display their 'true' self to administrators or managers, without risking, presumably, death either from direct violence or the indirect violence of losing their jobs. Abel, who grew up in government subsidized housing—the projects or ghettos of New York City—worked a dangerous, underpaid job beneath the city as part of the Fordist inspired industrial economy, in which people of color, Blacks and

Browns, contributed a vital source of abundant and cheap labor while remaining trapped, held hostage, in a precarious position of socioeconomic marginality. The marginalized ghetto and the precarious labor conditions worked to efficiently extract Black labor power while keeping Black laborers, with their Black bodies and Black lives, at a distance, sealed off, violently blocked, from the material capitals of whiteness.

The above passage between Serge and Abel chronicles a preparation for flight—both the literal flight across the Atlantic Ocean and the more figurative, fugitive material flight from marginality, the confined spaces of the projects and the underground tunnels, the across that lays at the edge of thresholds that Abel is so accustomed to staying behind. Throughout the text Abel expresses reservations at entering and being in certain spaces,

I hesitated for a moment, knowing my Black ass didn't belong there. (45)

And one thing struck out: There wasn't a Black face to be found. That shit made me nervous. (51)

I turned quickly away, a nervous prickling sensation racing down my spine. What the hell was I thinking? What if a cop had seen me looking at her? (37)

These excerpts illustrate how Abel was accustomed to navigating through landscapes fragmented along racial codes with a knowledge of where Blackness was permitted and where it was not—those places where one's being there can become dangerous. In preparing for flight, Abel is preparing to commit an act of transgression—a Camusian moment when the enslaved reaches his or her limit and refuses to “submit to suffering in abject silence”⁹⁴—to *flee*, to venture to places in which working class raised-in-the-projects Blackness was not to be found, to venture to places outside of the domain of Blackness, outside of the local and the sanctioned. A preparation for flight begins long before one is seated and awaiting the plane's take-off from the runway. Preparing for flight began with Abel's Grandmother, who went to sleep every night “praying you [Abel] won't end up slaving in New York 'til the end of your days.” (19) Countless other grandmothers are preparing their grandchildren, and their great-grandchildren for flight to the outside that they hope is better.

⁹⁴ David Scott “The Paradox of Freedom: An Interview with Orlando Patterson” in *Small Axe* 17.1 2013

Preparation for flight began when Serge realized how the conditions of capital make it “cheap and easy for us to destroy our brains and our guts [after watching] too many brother and sisters from the working classes lose their lives by ingesting poison.” (31) This is what makes the arrival to the outside so special for the Black subject. For the one individual, the one son or daughter who makes it out, there have been generations that been preparing for that single flight, making sure they have the clothes, the experiences, the knowledge, the histories, the tenacity, the way of being that will be necessary to survive the flight and to survive what comes after the arrival. It must be noted, however, that many have perished preparing for flight—from the nameless enslaved, to Emmitt Till, to Jordan Davis, to Renisha McBride, to the 415 killed in Chicago in 2013—meeting violence while still in transit, their lives arrested without warrant.

Does One Ever Arrive?

Perhaps there is a predilection for the story of the journey. For so much of the recounting of the history of Blackness concerns the journey, the passage, the flight of fugitivity as details of the dangerous underground railroad, of the great migration from the American South to the urban North, of the beautifully strong Civil Rights Movement, the trek from the ghetto to the suburbs, and the brave diasporic returns to the African continent. In charting these historical narratives, the story quite often ends with the moment of arrival, the moment when the enslaved touches the shores of Canada to become persons, the moment when that great march on Washington reached the national mall and legislation was finally passed, the moment when Negroes arrived up north, arrived on campus, or arrived in the White House. The story of the journey is so beautiful, so devastating and entails so much sacrifice and perseverance, one can only hope that the moment of arrival will finally bring validation, acknowledgement, and perhaps even freedom. For isn't that what Blackness is, was about: the journey towards the *arrival* of freedom? But standing amidst the tumultuous contemporary, looking back at histories of journeys toward freedom, one must question, first, whether freedom truly arrived, and, if so, was it able to remain? Although one can glance at the contemporary and suggest that because the conditions of Blackness are better than before, freer than before, that the arrival was real, such as a suggestion would be premised on what is visible and what is not. What is visible would largely indicate an arrival of freedom, as there is a very visible Black President of the United States, very visible Black middle and upper middle classes, a very

visible presence of Black people in popular culture. It is what is not visible—for “if the hegemony of white supremacy is already (and only) excessive, its acts of repetition are its access to *unrepresentability*; they dissolve its excessiveness into *invisibility* as simply daily occurrence”⁹⁵—that complicates claims of freedom arrivals, as the work of French born and United States trained sociologist Loïc Wacquant elaborates:

By the end of the seventies, then, as the racial and class backlash against the democratic advances won by the social movements of the preceding decade got into full swing, the prison abruptly returned to the forefront of American society ...

[...]

What makes the racial intercession of the carceral system different today is that, unlike slavery, Jim Crow and the ghetto of mid-century, it does not carry out a positive economic mission of recruitment and disciplining of the workforce: it serves only to warehouse the precarious and deproletarianized fractions of the black working class.
96

The moments of arrivals were accompanied or followed by a transformation: enslavement turned into Jim Crow, which turned into the Ghetto that is now in its contemporary form as the Hyperghetto and Mass Imprisonment. These transformations of the means of oppression and anti-Black racism, and this reliance on the superficially visible in discerning whether or not freedom has arrived are not limited to geopolitical parameters of the United States, despite the claims of some in the Netherlands who work to articulate racism as something that is confined to the United States in order to maintain the racial innocence, the façade of progressive liberalism, of their polity. In *Haarlem*, the idea of a tolerant and clean Amsterdam is deployed by means of comparison to the United States in a conversation between Abel and Sophie, as Abel compliments Amsterdam:

“And everything is so damn clean. So safe and polite and well organized...No poor ladies freezing on the street corners.

She laughed softly. “It is true that the buildings look clean. The Dutch do feel safe in their homes... But my country has other faces, too. Believe me, Abel. There’s plenty of crime and filth and fear.”

⁹⁵ (emphasis added) see “The Avant-garde of White Supremacy” by Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton

⁹⁶ Loïc Wacquant “From Slavery To Mass Incarceration” In *New Left Review* 13, January-February 2002

“Woman, I’ll bet you’ve never even seen the kind of shit that goes on in the States.”

(65-66)

“It’s true you look quite Dutch,” she said thoughtfully. “I saw that right away.”

“And it doesn’t matter that I’m Black?”

“There are Dutch territories in the Caribbean. Aruba, Curaçao, and Saba—”

“But white people don’t really think of Caribbean people as *Dutch*, do they?”

“We know that the cultures are different, but they have the full rights of citizens when they live in Dutch territories.”

“Well, Black people have been in America since before the *Mayflower* and we still don’t have equal rights.”

“We are a small nation, surrounded by big neighborhoods. Perhaps we feel the need to welcome all our people.”

(66)

This exchange between Abel and Sophia, and their relationship broadly, expresses some of the novel’s Baldwinian underpinnings. Later in the text, Sophia discloses to Abel that she too has been in recovery from alcoholism for “seven years, four months, and twenty-two days” (67) and both Abel and Sophia have a sibling still struggling with abuse—for Sophia it is her younger sister who is also prostituting and for Abel it is his newly discovered twin brother, a jazz musician, who grew up in Britain and the Netherlands and uses “smack” or heroin. Baldwin calls upon us, human beings, to confront the darker, less appealing aspects of our human condition, the gritty, the violent, the negative aspects of our individuated and collective beings that we often want to conceal out of view, to forget, to displace or deflect onto someone or something else. Confronting the darker aspects of our self is not enough, however, for one must also work to accept the pain and humanity of the other, for it is only in recognizing and accepting the vulnerable, flawed humanity of the other that we can accept our own flawed existence. This is why in “Sonny’s Blues”, the 1957 short story that inspired *Haarlem*, the unnamed older brother is able to gain self-understanding through his recognition of the anguish of his younger brother Sonny, a process of recognition and acceptance that Neff reimagines in Abel and Sophia. Baldwin layers several riffs on the importance of listening

in “Sonny’s Blues”: how one could not be free until one listened, how one must be willing to listen when a musician or artist is finally able to release “that storm inside”, for, he writes, “while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard.” Because it took Abel over forty years to “get outside”, as Baldwin writes, and witness the clean and beautiful Amsterdam, it is hard for him to listen to Sophia’s insistence that there is filth and fear even if it is not readily visible. Abel has no issue confronting and acknowledging the dirt of his own country, for he lived in the midst of it, where it was unavoidable. This is why Baldwin, and others, are able to argue that even though Blackness experiences agony, out of this agony comes a unique and complex understanding of humanity and the human condition that is cognizant of how “hatred and misery and love” coexist and intertwine in a way that is felt like ocean spray on skin leaving droplets of water stuck on the hairs of our arms and legs.

Because Abel is, perhaps for the first time, feeling as if he is a part of a community in the Netherlands, since he traveled there because of “a kind of loneliness” (66), Sophia seems reluctant to admit that his and her Blackness may complicate their Dutch identity. Sophia was very likely aware of the problems arising in the Netherlands due to Dutch resistance to racialized immigrants, but she still chooses to deploy the legal truism that Caribbean immigrants are entitled to the full rights and privileges of Dutch citizenship, thus, proclaiming the truth of that idea by repeating it, “naming” or uttering the promise of citizenship it in order to “claim” it—as the utterance becomes real by virtue of it being spoken. Even though Abel recognizes her infidelity to reality he decides not to press the issue for he “hadn’t traveled to Amsterdam just to find some reason to diss it.” (67) Further, the comparison presented between the United States in which Blacks still lack equal citizenship rights and the Dutch where all people are embraced, signals Sophie’s embracing of Abel. Despite his disenfranchisement in America, where “the tunnels feel like home” (66), the Netherlands becomes Sophia *writ large* as she expresses her growing acceptance of Abel, his Blackness, and his difficult past, as she confesses to Abel stating, “In your eyes I see loneliness and a quiet despair. I think you have searched a long time for something—or someone—to trust.” (68-69) Abel’s growing love for Amsterdam, for the Netherlands, is consummated when he has sex with Sophia, during which she

made him feel “a kind of a deep, smothering safety. Like this was the one sure thing in my life.” (72) For Abel, the beauty and safety of Amsterdam becomes yoked to Sophia.

Haarlem's Baldwinian roots are made increasingly clear in its consistent critique of evasion, of avoiding truths and realities of the past and present, as Serge unequivocally explains to Abel, “Some wounds won’t stop bleeding until you start dealing with them.” Even though one can hide from reality through substance abuse, the reality will not disappear but very likely will only get worse. Even in *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin comments on self-deception, the “elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, [that people use] to make themselves and the world to appear to be what they and the world are not.” The evasion of reality, and seeking shelter in illusions, are not just the acts of the individuals, but can also be the acts of collectives and of nations. Baldwin unrelentingly critiqued the racial innocence of whiteness, the willful ignorance of the histories and realities of race, colonialism, enslavement, and apartheid—the horrors of the past and present. Baldwin writes in the essay *Stranger in the Village*, which recounts his experiences in Leukerbad, Switzerland:

People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who remains in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster. (174-175)

Sophia’s insistence that the Dutch “feel the need to welcome all of our people”, contrary to the United States, alludes to a broader phenomenon in the Netherlands in which the violent expression of racism in the United States is used as evidence that racism does not exist in the Netherlands in hopes of maintaining Dutch racial innocence. Racial innocence, as political theorist Lawrie Balfour has noted, can “accommodate both an earnest commitment to the principles of equal rights and freedom, regardless of race, and a tacit acceptance of racial division and inequality as normal.”⁹⁷

In 1877, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, an African-American a-cappella ensemble formed in 1871 composed of students from Fisk University, performed in the Netherlands after touring other parts of Europe in hopes of raising money. Scholar Helen Metzelaar has done original archival research

⁹⁷ in *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (27)

on this little known history and notes that the Dutch hosts of the singers “preferred to concentrate on slavery in the United States.”⁹⁸ Although the Dutch expressed moral outrage over enslavement in the US, there were few, if any, connections drawn between the history of American enslavement and the then very recent history of Dutch colonial slavery that was only abolished in 1863, decades after Britain in 1834 and France in 1848. Throughout the twentieth-century, and continuing into the present, there have been reports and images of US anti-black racism published in the Netherlands. These images and reports of US anti-black violence that have circulated throughout the Netherlands, in newspapers and magazines, and have shaped how anti-black violence is perceived and understood. Publishing brutally detailed accounts and images of American lynchings, some Dutch individuals have used the representation of anti-black violence in the US as a means of deflecting legitimate claims of racism in the Netherlands. Because Dutch racism, as does all forms of racism, takes on many forms, many point towards how Dutch expressions of anti-black racism do not mirror the expression of anti-black violence in the US in order to argue that anti-black racism does not exist in the Netherlands. Racism becomes that which occurred elsewhere historically, a matter of ‘there’ that happened ‘then’. This arguably dominant framework routinely locates the origin of anti-black racism in the United States, and presents its Dutch manifestations as wallowing in a dark colonial past, sealed off from the liberal present.

Racism, then, is delimited to a specific geopolitical temporality, a time and space outside of the Dutch’s immediate environs that imagines and posits anti-black racism as something exceptionally US American, and possibly South African. Holding anti-black racism in the US as the prototypical expression of “real” racism defines racism as structural violence against Black people that is characterized by deep racial antagonisms, which one, ostensibly, does not find in the Netherlands. Despite the growing evidence against it, the notion, the myth of the Netherlands as a generous, welcoming, and tolerant (non-racist) country has proven to be firmly entrenched. The constant retelling of this myth, the repetition of this strategic utterance, has worked to strengthen the idea of the White *Autochtoon*⁹⁹ Dutch person as benevolent, welcoming, tolerant, and committed to a

⁹⁸ Metzelaar, Helen. "A Hefty Confrontation: The Fisk Jubilee Singers Tour the Netherlands in 1877." *Tijdschrift Van De Koninklijke Vereniging Voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 55.1 (2005): 67-86. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.

⁹⁹ *Autochtoon*—this Dutch term translates to "originating from this country" as opposed to the term *Allochtoon* which translates to "originating from another country" and is used to refer to immigrants and their descendants.

progressive liberal agenda, rendering specious any charge of racism against them. This image of tolerance and progressive liberalism impedes any acknowledgment or exploration of the oppressive structural sociopolitical processes that detrimentally influence the lives of racialized *Allochtoon* citizens in the Netherlands. The assertion of smiling innocence silences the legitimate claims of the existence of a concealed racial contract which,

... establishes a racial polity, a racial state, and a racial juridical system, where the status of whites and nonwhites is clearly demarcated, whether by law or custom [that works to] secure the privileges and advantages of the full white citizens [while] maintaining the subordination of nonwhites.¹⁰⁰

Racial innocence, which frames racism and racialization as questions of “good” or “bad” individual behavior, works with the Dutch national discourse of tolerance and benevolence and its purportedly colorblind and depoliticized discourse. However, the problem is not the “good” or “bad” intentioned individual, but the systemic privileging of “Dutch-looking” people. Appeals to innocence, ignorance, and good intentions erase accountability, and mask how white Autochtoon Dutch individuals have profited from a whiteness that is imagined as innocent while structural racial inequalities continue to be reproduced in Dutch society. Spectacular displays of US anti-black racism as “real” racism conceals the reality of anti-black racism in the Netherlands, which often takes the form of an administrative and juridical violence that is imagined to be less than less savage than bodies hanging from trees, despite the material similarity between the two, as expressed in the following quote from a 2009 blog post entitled “Is Amsterdam Bijlmer turning into a Ghetto?”

It seems like a ghetto disease, but just like East London also Amsterdam Bijlmer is turning into an American ghetto. Amsterdam Bijlmer is a neighborhood in the city district Amsterdam South-East, it's the district where large Antillean, Surinam and African communities live. The latest incident was the killing of a nineteen-year-old black teenager by another black teenager. With twenty-two shooting incidents this year, Amsterdam Bijlmer is headline news in The Netherlands.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (1997)

¹⁰¹ see Afro-Europe Blog article “Is Amsterdam Bijlmer turning into a ghetto?” October 13th, 2009

Concluding Comments: On Stew's *Passing Strange*¹⁰²

Departing Amsterdam with a Fugitive Tourist's Arrival

For the traveler who has set out alone with no mandate except a plan to escape from his own cultural milieu, the Other and his difference will be held in esteem: the exotic landscape and the contact with faraway and different people offer him the deterritorialization that he is seeking as a means of resolving his own internal conflicts or of discovering new sources of artistic inspiration...¹⁰³

Tourism becomes a quest to recover the lost authenticity, to experience a reality more "real" than that offered by the modern world.¹⁰⁴

Stew's musical, *Passing Strange*, —layered with a love of "60s Los Angeles AM radio, 70s soul and OG punk rock"—opened on Broadway in 2008. The protagonist is Youth, a teenage African-American male growing up in a late 1970s, Christian, middle-class home in South Central Los Angeles with a single mother. Youth is eager to escape. He especially wants to escape from his Mother who pushes Youth to conform to a particular form of black identity, as when she asks him to go with her to the Baptist fashion show. His mother is the primary source of his anxiety throughout the play as she constantly questions, "Why don't you want to be around your own people?" It is not simply that Youth does not want to be Black, or be around Blackness, it is that he does not want to be Black and have to deny the hybridity, the diversity, that is Blackness. When Youth connects the church service to blues music and the African oral call-and-response tradition, his mother abruptly slaps him for suggesting that church spirituals, traditional African music, and the blues are diasporically connected. She chastises, "Don't you know the difference between the sacred and the profane?" to which Youth poignantly responds, "I can't hear the difference." As Stew reminisces about his own upbringing in the Black middle class in an interview, "[t]he only thing worse than being African was being some shiftless blues guy." With his mother's slap, Youth realizes that even though Blackness is radically diverse, a heterogeneous assemblage composed of disparate

¹⁰² Quotes from the Musical are taken from Stew, Heidi Rodewald, and Annie Dorsen. *Passing Strange: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema, 2009. Print

¹⁰³ Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi and Mildred Mortimer "Travel, Representation, and Difference, or How Can One be a Parisian" in *Research in African Literatures* 23.3 (28)

¹⁰⁴ Wenche Ommundshen "The World, the Text, and the Tourist: Murray Bail's "Homesickness" as Guide to the Real" in *Journal of Narrative Technique* 21.1 1991 (2-3)

but intimate parts, that diversity is often denied and suppressed by various means, including a Black middle class that works to deploy a certain type of African-American identity as authentic and sufficient. Youth tries various means of escaping his middle-class, post-Civil Rights existence, which he finds “slave”-like. He smokes marijuana with Mr. Franklin his starry-eyed “Baptist rebel” choir teacher and preacher’s son who fawns over the idea of Baldwin and Camus in Paris cafes but has yet to leave the country. Sitting in Mr. Franklin’s Volkswagen, high on marijuana, Youth listened to him talk about Stockholm, Rome, and Paris and felt the “words wash over him like a Bach fugue creeping out of a cheap car...” the Latin word *fugue* (flight) emerges again as he thinks, “thank you brother, thank you for this fugue.” Fugue, then, is used two ways: the first is in reference to a contrapuntal musical composition in which a short melody is introduced then integrated into the other parts, the second is “a state or period of loss of one’s identity, often coupled with flight from one’s usual environment.”¹⁰⁵ Drug induced fugues take place throughout the musical as Youth experiments with marijuana and hashish, acid, and speed, in partial acts of escapism in which Youth and his friends seek to depart from or to complicate the banality of their suburban existence on a “psychedelic underground railroad ride”. Other times Youth’s drug use is about augmenting or bolstering his sense of self, of discovering new, or deeper aspects, to step or float outside of his typical boundaries. Mr. Franklin is well versed in Albert Camus as he remarks that even “Slaves got options! Options, ya dig? I’m talking escape....revolt...death.” Youth also forms a punk-rock band called the “Scaryotypes” whose song “Sole Brother” has lyrics such as “I’m at war with Negro mores. I’m at war with ghetto norms. My Mother stands in the doorway begging me to conform.” Youth dares to imagine a different way of living and being. For Youth, there is nothing that is “authentic” or “real” in Los Angeles and his acquiescence to the niche and identity that has been carved out for him would be to live in bad faith.

Before Youth can depart Los Angeles he must confront his Mother and during “Mom Song” the narrator remarks that Youth’s “questioning of everything” is breaking her heart. Youth’s constant questioning, his realization that his life in Los Angeles is not the only life possible signals his full

¹⁰⁵ from New Oxford American Dictionary

acquiescence into adolescence, that he is ready to create a life that may not include his mother. Mother tells Youth that “See I’ve been running from this world for far longer than you. But I didn’t know where else to go, so I hid from it in you.” Although Youth’s angst-ridden relationship to his middle-class upbringing can cause the viewer to also think of his Mother and her agenda as problematic, one should not forget that the play is set directly post-Civil Rights a time in which many urban ghettos were still burning from riots, and Civil Rights public policy measures were being weakened as conservatives took over Federal leadership. Mother’s decision to raise her son in what she felt was one of the best available options for his continued social-economic progress is, in many ways, understandable. Mother’s confession that she has been running from the world but did not know where to go reminds one of the generations of Black Americans accommodating to new-found freedoms, whether in post-Reconstruction or during the Great Migration to the urban North. These Black folks were running but running towards the best available option in a context that was not entirely rid of anti-Black racism and marginalizing apartheid policies. The suburb was America’s answer to the problem of urban, inner-city Blackness and post-War societal uncertainty, yet many individuals who grew up there began to resent and resist its ethos of conformity, banality, and an opiated, delusional sense of the Real. *Passing Strange* locates Blackness within that narrative of wandering, rebellious teenagers, which does not go entirely smoothly, as Youth’s Uncle satirizes: “I’m just tryin’ ta live mah life”??? You better leave that kinda crap to whitey!” Youth responds:

Gotta get away from these philistines, philistines!!!

Aint no way out, huh? Is that what you think? Well, guess what! You know what I’m saving money for? I’m going to Europe. And not just to visit. I’m moving there for good!

Soon, Youth is saying “Auf wiederschén, L.A.P.D” and finds himself on “Air Amsterdam Flight Zero. Non-stop to the Real...” The Narrator sets the scene:

Amsterdam, spring sunshine,
And the vibe is alive and the girls look fine,
He sits in a café, like Baldwin back in the day.

And he saw that his whole journey through the bowels of the middle-class coon show had led him to this single moment of utter crystalline clarity...

The musical stresses the parallels between Youth's arrival in Europe and the precedent that was set by Baldwin and Josephine Baker who broke Paris, and Youth, who has "broke his chain and escaped to the North!" is ready to make Amsterdam his. Sitting in the *café*, Youth makes acquaintance with a host of typical Amsterdam types, open to sex, drugs, and jazz, and he soon acquires the keys to a flat from a friendly, sensual waitress. With the keys to her flat in his hands, Youth remarks "And after so long feelin' so alone, I feel like picking up the phone, and calling up that place called home to say I found a brand new family, Where I can be that thing called 'me' ". Thus, in the moment of dislocation and relocation Youth feels that he can be his "self" which is a slight display of naivety as he assumes that he has arrived at *the* authentic self and not just embodying another performance of one of many possible selves.

The importance of Youth's trip to Amsterdam is illuminated just before he departs, now leaving his potential lover, the waitress, who gave him a place to stay. Leaving just before it got "real" Youth writes home to Mr. Franklin, a beautiful, difficult letter:

Dear Mr. Franklin: Today I don't feel as ugly as I did yesterday. In high school gym showers I crouched in shame like Adam in the garden, but this morning in Amsterdam I was ten foot tall on a movie screen staring down at myself in the back row.

...

Today in Amsterdam the charcoal drawing she made of me naked doesn't look as ugly as I felt yesterday. This is the real city of angels. They remade me in their image...Did I say already, Mr. Franklin, that today in Amsterdam they taught me how to wear my body? Today I learned that even if its ugly man, you got to wear it like a gown.

Black philosopher Tommy Curry rightly noted, "there are no theories to describe or situate the internalization of this pathology [how white supremacy damages the "material and psychological existence of Black people in total"] in Black men or boys".¹⁰⁶ Beneath Youth's veneer of angry rebellion, of frustration and impatience with Negro mores, is an exposed human vulnerability of

¹⁰⁶ from "On Orville Lloyd Douglass and Why Black Men Hating Themselves Have No Academic Currency" (blog post)

feeling ugly that is situated with how feeling ugly is a fundamental parcel of anti-Black racism. *Passing Strange* is aware of middle-class privilege, but it is also aware that racism transcends class and that young Black people born in the aftermaths of struggle face unique issues that are both universally human but at once shaped and predicated upon the problem of race.

Amsterdam is slowly healing from its experiences of colonialism and enslavement, a healing effort that is being led by passionate and brave Dutch Caribbean citizens who want their country to acknowledge its problems and to honestly work to address them. As the Dutch heal, so too do Black Americans who travel to Europe, in this case, Black men, sometimes naïve of what lies beneath the surface in the countries they travel to, but nonetheless carrying scars that can only be seen when outside of the light of one's home country. These scars need to be kissed by a friendly waitress; they need to be joked about by well-meaning friends.

I remember when someone in Europe said that she found my full lips to be beautiful. I remember feeling skeptical because of the long history/contemporary of Eurocentric aesthetics. I remember not believing her but I also remember reflecting on what it meant to be hesitant to accept love. This is Blackness.

Travel Account 5:

With the proliferation of the means of movement and communication, and with the lure of always being elsewhere, we are continuously torn from the *here* and *now*.¹⁰⁷

I decided to walk around downtown Amsterdam for the day. I had purposefully wakened up early, and was happy to step in a sunny, crisp morning with several hours to spare before my flight to Ghana. I got off the Metro at the *Amsterdam Centraal* station, a sprawling piece of neo-Renaissance architecture that sits adjacent to the water. I did not have an itinerary for the day and it was still too early to go to a museum, so I found myself just walking and taking in the city. I walked alongside the canals and the businesses that lined the main street. Most were closed, but luckily I was able to find an open café. I ordered coffee, baked beans, fried egg, sausage, and dry toast. Going back outside, along the canals, I decided not to wear headphones. Even though there wasn't anything to hear beside the ambiance of street sounds and the breeze that was almost too chilly, I did not want to close myself off to the world around me. After walking several miles, with only my thoughts to accompany me, I began to realize that I was embarking upon this trip on my *own*, that, in a few

¹⁰⁷ The Invisible Committee. *The Coming Insurrection*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009. Print.

hours, I would be leaving for Ghana where I knew no one, not even the place where I would be staying. Upon the realization of my solitude, I reluctantly grew excited as I embraced that *this* was the journey, it was unfolding here and now. Beneath that excitement, that anticipation for the departure to the coming beginning, was an impression of opportunity, of chance, perhaps even freedom. Perhaps this is what makes arrivals and journeys so central for Black people, perhaps this is something, some felt memory, that comes out of the histories of enslavement and captivity—a realization that in the interior of the process of becoming, of unfolding and happenings, might lie the ability to determine one's own life, to determine the course, the configuration, the meanings of one's being. Is this ability freedom? I don't necessarily think so. This ability is not a disconnected political ideal, this ability is an embodied feeling, an innervation drawn from the joy experienced by the formerly enslaved, the formerly colonized, a fleeting feeling that comes upon being on their *own* in those moments when the confines have lapsed, when the gates were broken or left unlocked, when one's foot touched soil, the earth outside.

I felt butterflies later that day, when I turned a corner in Schiphol to the gate that my flight would be departing from. African faces and voices, of children, women, and men, Ghanaian, Senegalese, and Nigerian, greeted me. I curiously became conscious of my American attire, my American way of being, my linguistic confinement to the island of Anglophone, and my relatively light brown skin. I found a seat, and, this time, put on my headphones, tightly. The journey was here and now.

Chapter 3: Ghana**Ghana Keywords**

Freeman Peacetown John Eric CHF
 Senya Garbage Walking Boredom Reading Megan
 Anger Frustration Banality Douglas Priscilla

 The Maid Brothers Rasta Beach Traffic Accra
 Grocery Store Whiteness/Blackness
 Marketplace/Fight
 Catching a taxi Market place sellers Food Bean Lady

 Ghanaian Students Chloe Climbing the Mountain Medical Students

 Cape Coast Rastafarians Cape Coast Teaching Students

 Fishing Shores Movies TV German

 Kasoa Volunteering Local Neighbors

 Arrival/Airport

Opening Notes: The Conditions of Arrival

I cannot begin as if history did not happen.

The conditions of arrival are of the self and the makings of the self. The conditions of arrival are, partly, the conditions from which one departed that one carries and travels with. They are also the conditions of the place one arrives to. These conditions can be social, political, and economic and are dynamic, constantly changing, but historically rooted. They shape one's experiences abroad. The conditions of arrival can be one's mental, psychological, or emotional state when first arriving, a state of being that has more to do with where one is coming from, than where one is going. These conditions can be out of one's control, the products of past wars and grievances, institutions and structures. Sometimes this can be advantageous for one can arrive in a place in which the conditions of one's existence is given a new positive meaning that is different from the negative meanings in the place of departure. Yet this provokes the idea that in the process of passage, meanings can dissipate, simply disintegrate and fall into the ocean, so that, when one arrives there is space on one's body to be ascribed with something new. It would seem to be more accurate that meanings persist during passages, that you carry them with you, consciously or subconsciously, the meanings of before departure can be found somewhere. With the globalization of anti-Black racism, this idea becomes all the more ominous as we see (Black) Africans making voluntary and forced passages across seas to places like Israel, India, and New York where the meanings of before departure persist, their skin remains Blackened and they face anti-Black racism in all three localities. Nonetheless, one should not totally foreclose the idea that one can arrive to a place that is better than the place one left. This is not to re-hash dewy eyed dreams of America- the land of opportunity, but to reverse that passage, which is precisely what Black American expatriates, travelers, and escapees exemplify, a reversal, a contradiction of the American Dream in which they ventured outside and preached a sermon not approved by the US Government. Yet for those reared in America, those who some would call 'nationally-alienated', whose deepest roots only go to the American South, there really is no leaving America. It lives inside of you, resting in your consciousness and skin. Black American travel writing is constantly speaking towards America, moving back and forth between abroad and home.

What I am most interested in is the difference between the conditions of arrival for myself, a self-proclaimed 21st century native son and the Black Expatriates of the mid-twentieth century who left for Ghana amidst the Cold War and Civil Rights movement/burgeoning Black Power movement. I am aware of what are *not* the conditions of my arrival: I did not depart as a politically active member of the domestic or international Black freedom struggle. In 1961, Black American writer and actor Julian Mayfield was becoming closely involved with Robert F. Williams, a militant NAACP leader. There was a violent confrontation in North Carolina that year, in which Freedom Riders were attacked. Both Williams and Mayfield fled the country. Williams went to Cuba and Mayfield went to Ghana where he would become one of the leaders of the Black American expatriate community and a close ally of Kwame Nkrumah. Historian Kevin Gaines speaks of expatriating to Ghana as a radical alternative to the civil rights movement, in which a transnational Black political consciousness emerged as a threat to the racialized liberal discourse of the mainstream civil rights movement.¹⁰⁸ Exile provided a space in which Black activists could challenge both US domestic and foreign policies as America sought to replace European hegemony with American empire.

Now, more than fifty years later, what are the conditions of my arrival to Ghana? What did I leave from and what did I arrive to?

When Julian Mayfield fled to Ghana he did so prior to the integration of international travel into global capitalism. Ghana, at that time, even in light of colonialism, was a space outside, a space in which one could exist beyond markets, commodities, profits, and services—when citizens were not just workers and travelers were not just consumers. When I traveled to Ghana, international voluntourism was now a central component of neoliberalism and global capitalism. It is neoliberal in that international volunteers, external actors/soft-soldiers, are furthering US cultural hegemony in taking on roles in newly privatized social services and fulfilling a niche left by a State that has retreated from public affairs as it focuses on maintaining the openness of markets to international investment. Further, as Saidiya Hartman has noted, even diasporic travel and ‘return passages’ to Ghana have now become commodified.¹⁰⁹ Under market-logic it makes sense that volunteering and

¹⁰⁸ Gaines, Kevin Kelly. *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2006. Print.

¹⁰⁹ Hartman, Saidiya V. "The Time of Slavery." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (2002): 757-77. Print.

diasporic wanderings would be privatized and organized into neat, purchasable entities. Yet, for most citizens of overdeveloped countries like the United States, volunteering or traveling abroad to countries in the Global South is specifically done with hopes of escaping capitalistic relations, of finding something more authentic, more human, which makes it further devastating that one arrives to find he or she has not escaped, but remain in the warm mouth of the beast. As a young Black American traveler I also found that not only could I not escape whiteness in Ghana, whiteness would prove to be a central facet of my experience. Perhaps, this is why Baldwin speaks of how the white and Black American can truly get to know each other when outside of America. The whiteness that surrounded me was heterogeneous—it ranged from a daughter of American diplomats to a German gap year student. Yet despite that heterogeneity there was a certain *viscosity* to whiteness, which geographer Arun Saldanha explains as when similar bodies become sticky, collect together, and acquire surface tension to become relatively impenetrable by other bodies.¹¹⁰ In a way, my being the “sole-brother” in the volunteer house, not white and not Ghanaian, made the group visible and coherent but left my sense of being, at times, incoherent and fluid as I lacked a definable niche beyond myself.

This narrative is a chronicle of frustrations, ambivalences, and struggles to maintain a sense of optimism, affective states that locate it in a more-than-representational approach as I focus on how my experiences took shape through encounters and interactions with human and non-human elements, like a rainstorm. In terms of fugitivity, I think there are multiple modes of escape that can be read into the narrative, modes that I do not necessarily want to delineate. As a writer, I have a penchant for subtlety and distaste for the abstract summary—the theory and philosophy are there for those that seek it out, but there is also a story. I am hoping to explicate and give slight linearity to the fragments of memories that exist in my head, a story that is trying to make sense of how this Black American fits into the contemporary situation. I ran into two Black young women, students at the University of Pennsylvania, at a waterfall in the Volta region. We were all in all white groups and exchanged pleasantries, not politics, and went back to our separate groups. Perhaps, those pleasantries were political, or perhaps we were afraid of our potential of viscosity, of stickiness, and were focused on finding a place within a whiteness that seemed to revel in how visibly cohesive it

¹¹⁰ Saldanha, Arun. *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2007. Print.

seemed in a mainly Black country. Integration isn't about dismantling white (supremacy), it is about dismantling any coherent notion of Blackness—and I say Black specifically because Black collectivity was once criminal and remains seen as a threat—leaving it fragmented and estranged from itself. Standing shirtless, drenched, and blurry eyed in that Hohoe forest, I felt ridiculous and reminded of every Black (middle-class) experience of glancing at each other at some New York City pub, or as the only two in an otherwise all white university class, and choosing not to speak, to remain the “sole-brother” or “sole-sister” because we're threatened by each other, competing with other, or scared of our potential for friendship because we don't want others to feel threatened by us.

This narrative does not avoid the conversation about whiteness. It, truly, cannot avoid that conversation. It is hoped that in this rumination comes a further consideration of the materiality of race. A materiality that is not static but involved in a process that moves and travels across bodies, feelings, and experiences. A materiality that is always becoming and reiterating within neoliberalism and 'post'-colonialism.

The Airport

John Slaughter does a good job in describing the differences between the European airport one departs from and the African airport one arrives to, unless one is arriving in, say, South Africa. He writes,

The authoritative, well-lit, well-organized atmosphere of Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport was replaced by a dimly lit terminal teeming with an unorganized hustle not dissimilar to a pickup game of basketball.¹¹¹

I don't fully understand what Slaughter means by "authoritative" or his use of a pick-up game of basketball as a metaphor—perhaps he means the humidity, the slight sweatiness one experiences when stepping off the climate controlled plane directly onto the pavement of the terminal and loading into a bus full of strangers to be transported to the main airport. Although a pickup game of basketball may seem improvisational, lacking the uniformity, the protocol of a more professional game, it, and the African airport, are not simply "unorganized", just not as sterile, as alienated and controlled. Perhaps he means that tangible electricity one feels in the core of their stomach, that I at least felt, as it slowly dawned on me that I was arriving back on the continent after two years. In Amsterdam I tried to act cool and collected about my impending adventure of solitude but up in the skies as we made our way across the ocean, I could not stop the incessant self-questioning over the finances required for the trip, how quickly I seemed to finish the spring semester and depart with barely enough time to get all of the required vaccinations. I received my Ghanaian visa the day of my flight, and prior to that I was nervously awaiting making the seemingly inevitable call to the airline to reschedule my flight after calling the Ghanaian embassy back to back to no avail. My mother must have known something because she kept me focused on packing my clothes, despite my lack of a visa. I grudgingly followed her instructions. When she called me downstairs to check the mail I caught a glimpse of her knowing smile, and *of course* there was my visa. Up in the sky, as the plane slowly descended to the earth beneath the clouds, I kept awaiting to see the bright city lights that are typical of arriving to a big city. Arriving in Accra, I only caught glimpses of the city below, shadows of buildings, then brushes of dark water swiftly passing under us before turning back to land. As we

¹¹¹ Slaughter, John Brooks. *Brother in the Bush: An African American's Search for Self in East Africa*. Chicago: Agate, 2005. Print.

edged closer to the earth the window beside my seat began to fog up, a sign of good things to come, I thought, excited for the warm weather. After awakening from a brief nap, I sparked up a conversation with my seatmate, a Ghanaian student at a small HBCU in Georgia. She was going home for summer vacation, as nonchalantly as I would go home to Detroit, and seemed genuinely excited when I told her that I was coming to volunteer for the summer. She lived in Accra, however, and I would be staying about an hour away in Kasoa. When the plane landed, and we each retrieved our carry on luggage, my mind became business like as I focused on getting through customs and baggage claims, and we quickly lost track of each other. We were soon under the yellow lights of the customs lines, separated off into African nationals, or AU members, and non-Africans nationals. I was slightly worried because I did not have an address to put as my residence. I only knew the name of the organization I would be working with, Cheerful Hearts Foundation. I often cringe when I have to say the name of the organization, it sounds like some Christian group that runs a shady orphanage, so I make sure to stress that it's a *local* NGO founded by two young Ghanaian guys who believe that education makes everyone *cheerful*. Perhaps I'm just a little pessimistic and would rarely non-ironically use the words cheerful or hearts. But standing in line, with the form in my left hand and a small pencil in my right, I decide to make up some address. I have no phone service so I can't even look up the information packet emailed to me earlier that detailed how to dress and greet in Ghana—"akwaaba means welcome"—so I just write down a foreign looking address with the city listed as Kasoa. There's an American college student standing behind me in line. Of course she is a pre-med student coming to Ghana to volunteer in a health facility that will allow her to do work that most places in America would not allow a college sophomore to do. Most of the volunteers I meet in Ghana are students in health care, from pre-meds, to actual medical students, to nurses, and even physician assistants, all itching to gain experience, their scrubs covered in sand and moisture at the end of the day. As I am thinking of how I'm going to be denied entry to the country for supplying a fraudulent address, she asks me what I'm doing in Ghana, "volunteering" I say and feel required to ask, "what about you?" "Oh, I'm volunteering too! What organization are you with?" When we realize that we will be volunteering with different organizations and living in different areas, we realize that our relevancy to each other is null and void and that there is little use in expending energy making small talk in the humid, tight waiting area. There is a woman I have been watching since Amsterdam, mainly because of the huge blonde and black rope-like braids wrapped around her

head, like the snakes of Medusa, and the three small children traveling with her. I wonder who she is as I watch her and the children disappear into the “African nationals” threshold into anonymity; our arbitrary connection, our being together in traveling, concludes. I finally step forward to present my documents to the customs officer. It’s a Ghanaian woman who doesn’t really look at me, but casually glances at my documents, takes my fingerprints and a scan of eye, before releasing me. The air is worried in the baggage claim area. The machine and the conveyer belt are ragged. Huge luggage slowly rumbles out like elephants crawling. The passengers gather around, eyes beady, fists clenched, breath held until they see their luggage. It is almost twenty-minutes before my bag emerges. I decided to only bring one long duffle bag and a backpack. Memories of dragging, literally dragging, too much luggage through the streets of Paris, the pair of black Nikes with the yellow swoosh and red tongue that I had to leave behind, still haunts me. I swing the duffle bag over my shoulder, its relatively easy to carry, but slightly too long to balance. I exchange my American cash for bright and colorful Ghanaian cedis, and proceed into the next room. Fully armed police officers greet me—they must have checked the address—their automatic weapons held as casually as if they were cups of water. “Do you need a taxi?” They ask, rather urgently. “No, someone is here to pick me up.” “Do you already have a place to stay?” “Yes, in Kasoa”. The officers look at each other before allowing me to pass. When I enter the main gallery of the airport, the area outside the gates, I realize that perhaps the officers were giving me one final respite before I enter *Ghana*. Inhale. The gallery is packed, full of people talking and staring at me. It catches me off guard. I turn to see if any other passengers from my flight are near me, but I am alone. I slowly walk into the entrance way, the packed room is almost dizzying, as people began to yell at me, asking me if I need a ride, somewhere to stay, asking where I’m from. I can’t help but make eye contact with those in the room in the way I always look at homeless people while everyone else diverts their eyes, and as soon as I do, they beckon, waving and calling. I’m supposed to be looking for my name held by someone from Cheerful Hearts. Slowly making my around, I’m learning how to ignore the chatter and try to focus on finding my name. People must sense the nervousness in my eyes, the way I slightly lurch forward when someone calls me as if they know me. The feigned familiarity is almost comforting. Somehow I see a tall and skinny brown skinned guy smiling at me. I look down and see “Calvin” scrawled on a poster in black marker. I go over to greet him and he gives me a Black handshake but with a snapping move I’m not used to. I can tell he has been waiting for me a while. I can tell that he

doesn't care. We make our way outside. Exhale. Stepping out of the airport, I follow Freeman to the taxi, a small-multicolored boxy car he has waiting and we get in. The driver is emblematic of what I will come to know as Ghanaian taxi drivers: a serious, quiet, usually wearing a polo shirt and jeans, ferocious driver who holds no qualms about beeping his horn. I quickly realize that there is exhaust coming into the window, but it doesn't really bother me. I am finally free to be excited. We turn out of the parking lot and immediately enter traffic. It's Friday night in Accra. The journey is here and now.

Africa is almost invariably experienced in overload the first time, what with one's busy senses sorting and transmitting more visual and aural stimuli in an hour than would fill a Northern Hemisphere day. In Africa, one *hears* in Technicolor.¹¹²

I love riding in taxis in Africa. Even though this is only my second time on the continent, when we are finally able to pick up some speed, memories of riding through South Africa, music thumping, the landscape passing by like a swimmer coming up for air, come floating back to me. I'm back on the continent, I think to myself, allowing my reality to sink into the pit of my stomach where it would sit, waiting to be digested. There are throngs of people outside, walking beside and in-between the cars and on the sides of the road. The taxi driver is silent as he expertly navigates the road. It's a different type of dark from America, no streetlights or businesses artificially lighting the night sky and scaring away the stars, just pits of fires glowingly mixed into the urban landscape of unfinished buildings and billboards. People are visible in the shadows, hanging out or selling goods. Freeman was already prepared to expect a Black American, and he chatted away as I looked out of my window. Freeman is young, only around 25, and is a former schoolteacher who had been recruited to work with Eric, the equally young founder of Cheerful Hearts Foundation. The conversation quickly steers towards the last Black American who volunteered with CHF, Amir from the University of Pennsylvania whose shadow would come to inform my time in the volunteer house. Amir and Freeman became best friends while he was in Ghana, and he turned Freeman onto to hip-hop music, like Meek Mills, a rapper from Philadelphia who is a bit aggressive for my tastes. I'm relieved that Freeman is so talkative, as I'm lost in what is outside my window and the sounds of the car and traffic forces us to yell. The roads are bumpy and the other drivers move unpredictably,

¹¹² David Levering Lewis "Ghana, 1963: A Memoir" in the American Scholar 68.1 1999 (42-43)

eager to fill up any space between cars. We reach a border point at the edge of Accra, there are sellers with goods, bread, eggs, apples, water, and cell phone minutes, piled high on top of their heads, they peer in the cars waiting to pay the toll with gleaming faces, as they call out the name of whatever they are selling—“Vortic! Vortic! Vortic!” a brand name of the water satchels, small plastic pouches of water, that I would be drinking all summer. Freeman explains that although “hawking” is illegal, it is accepted and widespread. He’s in charge of the child labor project that I will be working on, and so he also mentions that many of the street vendors are underage, a fact that I had already realized after glancing at weary young faces staring into my vehicle illuminated by the floodlights of the road border that they would stay behind. I’m reminded of the “street kids” of South Africa with ashen faces as grey as their tearing clothes. They were usually addicted to sniffing glue to stay warm and feel happy. I remember crossing streets to avoid running into them and how my friend almost collapsed crying after handing over her leftovers to a group of kids who surrounded us after we exited an Italian restaurant in Durban. I remember not knowing what to say to her after I pulled her away and held her, so we walked back to the hostel in a silence punctuated by tears because I, too, felt traumatized. My reality sank further into my stomach. As we crossed the border into Kasoa the landscape was similar: fire pits with people lining the streets, the market place sat right on the edge of the sidewalk, and soon we turned into the neighborhood. I would be living in an area called Peacetown. The road immediately became bumpy causing the car to move turgidly, up and down along the bumps. It is completely dark now, and we are going deep into the neighborhood. Eventually we pull up to a gate. It seems that we are in the middle of nowhere. The driver gets out to open the gate, and we pull in the driveway. I get out, retrieve my luggage and enter the house.

The front door leads directly into the living room. A weird yellow light, both bright and obfuscating, covers the room and it takes a moment to adjust to it. It is a tiled living room, with a small TV showcasing static, and three large couches occupied by four loosely dressed white people. The one guy, who is so tanned that I initially thought he was bi-racial, is shirtless and wearing shorts, the girls in low cut tank tops and shorts. They seem exhausted or deeply relaxed, but try to muster enthusiasm to greet me. The guy, John, with a face that says, “if I have to”, gets up to show me to the guys room. There are four bunk beds, a single light blub, and there is a bathroom inside the room. He explains some of the primary house rules: to only flush for “number two” and to only take drip showers because there is limited water. I take the bottom bunk. His bunk is covered with a

mosquito net, and seems lived in, complete with a journalist's memoir of covering war torn Africa. The net reminds me to take my malaria pill. John told me that he was also working on the child labor project and I, like the ambitious graduate student that I am, told him "I want to hit the ground running." John laughs and tells me "I'll get there" as if I wasn't being serious. He gives me my first satchel of water and I pretend like I know how to open it, the trick, I would later find, is to bite a small hole in the corner of the pouch—you eventually get used to the taste of plastic. Luckily I still had a few bottles of water I bought at Schiphol. After staring at myself in the mirror under the dim bathroom light and finally taking off the sweatshirt that I had been wearing since Amsterdam, I decide to go back into the living room to introduce myself. There is John (25) from New Jersey, who has been volunteering in Ghana for over six months and clearly the "elder" "leader" of the house, Megan (21) from Kentucky and Ryan (21) from California who both arrived the week before I did, and Lena (19) from Germany who was finishing up a gap year after high school volunteering. I sit on the couch and find myself joining them in staring into the abyss. Perhaps a combination of heat and the weird yellow light pushes us into our own thoughts, or perhaps the arrival of a new, Black volunteer has disrupted the chemistry of the house. I find it a bit odd that it is Friday night and not much going on. Lena explains that it is an "off night" and that there is usually "reggae night" to go to most weekends. I'm disappointed but accept the situation for what it is. Ryan, from the University of Southern California, tells me that she and Megan are leaving for Cape Coast the next morning and that I'm welcome to come. "Cape Coast?!" I think to myself: "I'm in no way prepared for Cape Coast right now. Plus what do I look like traveling with these two random white girls? Will I have to pay for my own separate sleeping arrangements? And they're waking up at 6am to leave and I haven't even unpacked yet." I was annoyed with my own lack of spontaneity, but Megan from Kentucky didn't really seem cool with Ryan's suggestion that I tag along. Ryan was clearly a chill California girl, and Megan not so much. I refused the offer. A few weeks later Megan admitted that she was a little reluctant about the idea and deliberately chose not to wake me up the next morning to make sure I didn't want to come. I told her I appreciated her honesty.

I forced myself to sleep that night. It was a restless, anticipatory, sleep eager for the morning. I woke up to the bright sun flowing into the window behind my bed and stroking my face, the sounds of the Mosque not far away, and the people in the neighborhood talking to each other. I stayed in the

bed for a while, awake, meditating. John had already left out for the day, and I was bothered that he didn't ask if I wanted to come. Megan and Ryan were already gone as well. It was only Lena and the Ghanaian woman who speaks little English and cleaned the house on the weekends, who remained. Lena finds me pretending to read in the living room, as I was not really sure what to make of myself and not really hungry for the rancid milk in the fridge. To my relief she explains that we'll be going into town later that day. Even though it was only my first day in Ghana, I couldn't imagine staying in the house. Lena told me, as we were walking towards Kasoa, why we waited for the Ghanaian woman to finish cleaning before we left, because— "you know" "I know" "everyone knows" —she did not want to leave her alone in the house. The Ghanaian cleaning woman would be fired, a few weeks later, for "stealing energy bars" from Ryan from California.



Walking through Kasoa Marketplace 1

Kasoa in the daytime is hectic. The sidewalks full of people, the street full of traffic—cars, vans, buses, and trucks coming and going and honking. Kasoa is a central transportation hub where you can catch a taxi going towards Accra and beyond, or go in the opposite directions to the more rural communities nestled alongside the ocean. The area has been rapidly urbanizing, and seems to be in a constant state of construction. Dust covers everything and the market place is spread throughout. On the wooden stands lined up on the sidewalk you can buy everything from DVDS, to shoes, to mangoes and avocados, bread, cell phones, clothing, and eggs. Lena and I walked swiftly; she was

trying to find a working atm machine. Each machine seemed to be a mile apart and the first few we tried failed to work. Reaching a working one, I was surprised that random Ghanaians offered to help us use the machine, my experiences in South Africa had taught me to think quite differently about such assistance. Come to think of it, the blonde German teenager that I was with probably had something to do with it.

I ate my first Ghanaian meal that afternoon in Kasoa. We stopped by a few food carts—I was not yet used to seeing poultry and fish sitting out in the sun in plastic coolers and wanted to try something meatless, like rice. We eventually found a woman selling jollof rice. I stood by while Lena ordered, in awe at how she navigated the language barrier. They found us seats, plastic white lawn chairs, to sit on in the back of the food stand. It was shadowy and cool, and we ate in relative quiet, taking a moment to enjoy a break from the hectic street. I pushed the meat in the rice aside on my plate. The cook would look at it and then at me when she took the plate away.

On our way back to the volunteer house we ran into three new arrivals, Jackie from Cornell, Bea from Colorado, and Lauren from Boston. They were all undergraduate students and wandering around the neighborhood. I decided to join them. We meandered on the hilly dirt roads laced with potholes—at the end of some days my black low-top Nikes and socks would be covered in mud—conversing about majors and the different projects we would be working on. Bea, whose government official parents' owned a brownstone in Georgetown, was the only one of the three who had been to Africa before, but “only on Safari”. Jackie, who would be rooming with John and I, is a public health major and the sheltered son of immigrants—he had to take a taxi to secondary school in New York City because he parents did not trust him taking the Metro. Lauren was a slightly anxious pre-med student at Boston University, who talked a mile a minute and loved Africa so much that she returned to Uganda this winter to volunteer in an orphanage. I'm sure her expertise was surely needed. She also loved how the Ghanaian children would tell her “Obruni, Obruni I love you” so much that she would repeat it to herself at the volunteer house, imitating their accents and small voices as she stroked her red hair almost frantically. I mention this because the repeated cries of Obruni the white volunteers would hear everywhere they went often made them uncomfortable; Megan from Kentucky confided to me that she could now empathize with

“celebrities”. One day I, in turn, confided to Megan. I was annoyed with how Lauren seemed to bask in being called Obruni, annoyed at how she seemed enjoy a clear consequence of colonialism and the forced fascination with white skin as she came home and told stories of how the children at the Liberian refugee camp she worked at would stroke her skin and hair. One volunteer in Ghana became so fed up with being called Obruni that he wrote an article in Ghana’s daily newspaper *The Daily Graphic*. In the article he writes,

Dear Citizens of Ghana,

As a white volunteer from the United States, I would like to express my displeasure with the frequent and ill-mannered use of the word, Obruni. I believe the common use of Obruni misrepresents the warm and educated Ghanaian culture because it unintentionally makes foreigners uncomfortable and seems ignorant.

In my time as a volunteer teacher at a small school in Accra, not a day has passed in which I have not been called Obruni. Simply walking 100 meters from the school where I teach in Kwasheiman to the soda vendor on the street corner, I am catcalled “Obruni” multiple times for mostly no apparent reason. Cab drivers, Tigo vendors, tro-tro attendants, young children, and random loiterers call out, “Obruni! Obruni!” Why? Is there really a need to remind me that I am white? Am I really such a marvel or anomaly?

This is a real article for I have not the imagination to make up something so ahistorical and self-centered—as the Ghanaians would say “random loiterers?! Aye! You’re not even from here.” This passage exposes quite clearly the shortsightedness of the writer who has taken it upon himself to police the language use of the Ghanaians. As I noticed how the volunteers became frustrated with the increased amount of attention they received, I kept quiet and simply thought of Fanon’s work on objectification or negroification, how human beings with dark skin became loaded with the meanings of the fictitious Negro, a fundamental aspect of colonialism and enslavement, and still cannot exist beyond their exteriority, an exteriority that still justifies the death, the hurt of those in Blackened bodies. I could not, or rather, did not care to explain this to the other volunteers. I was already acquiring a reputation as the philosopher of the house. I was reminded of how my white Best friend often would tell me that she was not comfortable riding through Detroit because she was sure she would be objectified, reminded of how frustrated I felt because she neglected to consider how I felt when we were forced to hang out in the suburbs because she felt more comfortable there. Although it was sometimes nice to be able to pass under the radar in Ghana, as most people wrote me off as another African national, it sometimes hurt when Ghanaians, children and adults alike,

would simply overlook, even fully ignore me, as they marveled at and conversed with my counterparts. Sometimes one child would straggle over to greet me, out of pure curiosity, slapping my hand before scurrying over to join the rest of the neighborhood in surrounding the whiteness.

On our tour throughout the neighborhood we ran into a group of young boys playing soccer. We stopped to join them. After getting tired we decided to take pictures before parting ways. Taking pictures turned into an event as there were three or four cameras to go around, and the young boys wanted to see each photograph that they would never see printed, never see again. I understand wanting to capture the moment, wanting to relay to our friends and family back home our experiences in Ghana with the people who are of this place, but taking pictures often felt inauthentic, and forced, as we contrived experiences to be captured, pursued fleeting friendships with individuals on the street just so that we could show how we 'connected' with the people. It often seemed less about the experience and more about the photograph. Some of the volunteers seemed almost giddy the day there was an incredible rainstorm. The streets were flooded and impassable, goods and animals perished, and buried trash and waste was unearthed and strewn about. As I thought about how the world's rural poor will be the most detrimentally affected by the consequences of climate change, as flooding in areas in places like Sierra Leone where entire coastal communities have been destroyed has already demonstrated, the others clamored about how Lauren sunk into the filthy water after stepping into a deep puddle when her and Bea ventured out to take pictures of the storm. Megan came into the volunteer office that day, drenched and breathless as she explained that a stranger offered her shelter in her home and even fed her. I stood on the porch and watched the rain pour, so loud, unrelenting, and so near. Carcasses of goats floated by as I listened to the clicks of cameras and laughter. The collision of the sounds of humans and the elements encapsulates a 'deafening silence'. I wondered what the world, as it existed in front of me, would look like the day after.



Rainstorm in Kasoa 1

Orientation was required on Sunday evening after dinner. We all sat in the living room and listened to Eric explain how and why he founded Cheerful Hearts Foundation. He previously worked in business before noticing an untapped niche in human development and social services that he now works to fill with international volunteers working in public health, education, and on child labor issues. That, of course, is not how Eric tells the story but is a summary of his winding tale that begins with the death of his father and lands into how education can change Ghana's future. I would hear Eric give his orientation speech over and over again to new volunteers, and with each time it began to sound more and more hollow. I would eventually conclude, three weeks into my time in Ghana, that a NGO, or at least this specific NGO, is no grander, no more altruistic than any other business. Cheerful Hearts simply provides a commodified experience for citizens from developed countries with slightly bleeding hearts, or more likely empty resumes, an experience that I am unsure whether Ghanaians truly benefit from.

In *Kinship* Philippe Wamba writes

In the end, I knew more about Africa than my white classmates, but was still susceptible to the prevailing American popular wisdom, which held Africa to be a wild, untamed jungle plagued by famine and bereft of Western technology, infrastructure and advanced social institutions. While I took the humanity of black people and their potential for brilliance to be self-evident...I found myself locked in the ambivalent state of loving and looking forward to going to a place I knew little about and secretly believed to be backward.¹¹³

¹¹³ Wamba, Philippe E. *Kinship: A Family's Journey in Africa and America*. New York: Dutton, 1999. Print.

Wamba beautifully hits on how one can both love a place but not know anything, or much of it, about it, how one can believe in the humanity of Black people while still believing in the myth of their inferiority, how the residuals of colonialism still lingers in air and soil, its molecules still trapped in particles of our thoughts, like oil in oceans, percolating out and influencing how we make the world. South Africa was the first African country I visited so the idea of an urban and cosmopolitan Africa was default for me. The Ghanaian condition of under, in-between, development was a surprise. I was unprepared for the lack of waste management for trash and sewage, for how food was not widely available and how I often was in need of protein. I was unprepared for how some volunteers would become bitter as the weeks passed and began to attribute their lack of success in the classroom, in the medical clinic, to some type of Ghanaian deficiency or defect. I was unprepared for how to defend the humanity of Black people—why did I feel the need to defend the humanity of Black people—without constantly going back to my go-to tropes of colonialism and underdevelopment for in the face of human squalor history only seemed to explain so much. I was unprepared to grapple with the fact that Ghana has only been independent for as long as my Mother has been alive. I was walking on paths of recent history. Colonialism's body had yet to decompose, perhaps the body hasn't even died yet, its heart still beats in the neoliberal global marketplace. What were we all doing in Ghana? With forced smiles and escapist conversations that likely seemed absurd to the outside listener as in one breath one vented about the emaciated toddler with arms the size of fingers held at the refugee clinic and then a tale of how one spent last spring break in Cabo San Lucas. Of course such escapism was to maintain our sanity for we could not wallow in misery and guilt—the thoughts of an unhappy American are blasphemous—because we weren't even sure if it was our misery to wallow in, to even speak of. America taught us well: how to smile, and consume, and be happy in the midst of the absurd and miserable. How else could have a clean and pure whiteness exist in the midst of Black suffering, how else could we pretend that the mass corporate prison and the ghetto does not exist, how else could those lives that keep exploding into death on the other side of the world not matter, how else do we keep on keeping on?

Each day the volunteers would come home from their various projects and eventually find themselves in the living room huddled around a laptop watching DVDs of American television shows—this is another incident that is so real that I could not make it up. The volunteers, who'd only been in Ghana less than one or two months, went through seasons of *Game of Thrones* and

House. No one thought that those hours could have been spent more productively learning about the country that we in—we were literally in Ghana, it was outside our door—or understanding why our services were needed in the first place. No, America had taught us very well. I don't believe that the volunteers were so naïve that they came to Ghana thinking they would actually make a difference, that the services and expertise of college students was needed. Volunteering provides a socially acceptable and financially possible reason to travel to an African country. For no one simply goes to Africa, there is always a purpose, whether it leisure, or research, or work, or discovery. Volunteering is a medium for respect and admiration, a unique story that one can tell family and friends and potential employers of how they spent time in Ghana making a difference. Implicit in that story is the inferiority of Black people, inferiority so profound that 19 and 20 year olds can work in medical clinics that are already overstaffed with educated Ghanaians and watch a delivery of a baby, gazing upon a woman's most intimate moment. An inferiority so profound that a college senior can travel around a village giving immunization shots to children without speaking their language, not even the greetings, or knowing who Kwame Nkrumah is, or the history of medical apartheid and experimentation against Black and marginalized people throughout the world. In the compartmentalization of the world into conceptual categories one is able to volunteer and complete such tasks without thinking of it as political or economic or connected to history, without considering themselves soft-soldiers.

In justifying the need for the child labor project the staff of Cheerful Hearts would often inundate us with how some poor Ghanaian parents undervalue formal education and send their children to go work on fishing boats. From the beginning I questioned the privileging of formal education over vocational education, even though I recognized the importance of learning English. We went into schools and told children about international human rights laws that Ghana is party to against child labor, telling them to spread the word to their friends still working on the boats or in the markets. It was clear on the first day of work that the child labor project was composed of mainly busy work in an attempt to separate it from those who worked specifically on education. In all actuality we were volunteer teachers. We worked on Microsoft Word "profiles" of the former child laborers that we sent to school, "success stories" that we sent to potential donors so that we could continue paying the student's school fees. No one discussed the sustainability of the project because there was none.

It was a cycle of dependency in which we were dependent on foreign donors and international volunteers and forced the students and their families to become dependent on us.



Child Labor Interview in Senya 1

We went into the fishing communities and completed ‘interviews’ with former child laborers and their parents, typically the mother. The interviews carried the clear message that the mother or father was wrong for sending their child away and that wrong justified the intervention of external actors. One such interview was in a small wooden enclosure in Senya Beraku and included the mother, a family friend or aunt, and the young boy. On our side it was a Ghanaian university student, a young translator from Senya, and I. The Ghanaian university student asked questions off of a sheet composed by Cheerful Hearts with questions like “how old was the child when [s]he was sent to work?” and “how often was the child fed?” and I recorded the answers with a pen and my iPhone, hurriedly writing down the translated responses. My presence felt arbitrary and unneeded. The fact that the interview was purely for research purposes was not clear to the families. The mother participated under the false assumption that we would be putting her son in school. We had to explain that he was only being considered for funding, and essentially was being put into a competition with other children. The winner would be the child in the worst condition, e.g. a child who was sent to work as a baby, lost a limb untying fishing nets, knows no English, and only received a quarter meal per day. Her son looked to be about 10 and healthy—the odds were against him.

Senya



Walking Through Senya 1

Of the three fishing communities that we worked in—Fettah, Nyanyano, and Senya Beraku—Senya was the most notorious. The volunteers in the house talked so quietly and so consistently about “touring Senya” and “doing Senya” that it acquired a sense of intrigue, as we envisioned what it—the poverty—would be like. Senya was John’s territory. In his months of working with Cheerful Hearts, he had essentially led the development of a small primary school and was working on plans of building a chicken and vegetable farm for the community as a possible source of sustainable income and nutritious sustenance. I arrived in Ghana during John’s last month volunteering—his time was coming to an end. I could sense the nervousness in his voice when we would talk one-on-one each of us on our bunk beds. It is almost as if he was talking to himself and I was just a medium. He didn’t feel as if he accomplished everything he wanted to in Senya: the erection of the schoolhouse was a recent development, the wood would only be painted a pale yellow two weeks into my time there, and the farm was no where near completion as there were debates with the local Chief over ownership of the previously unused land. He had also raised a small sum of money from friends and family back home to go towards the school project that would become the cause of a fierce public argument between him and Cheerful Hearts when it was discovered that the money may go towards *other* concerns.... John was also nervous about assimilating back into American life, he hadn’t followed any news or popular culture while abroad, and the new volunteers seemed more and more foreign as his time went on. He was clearly more comfortable with the Ghanaians, becoming exuberant and less mooney when in company that he could relate to as he exclaimed “aye!” and

navigated the streets like an experienced pro, forcing the newbies to almost run to catch up with him, their oversized backpacks and water bottles wobbling. I meanly thought John sounded like a caveman when he spoke to Ghanaians, speaking in grunts and short, staccato phrases. I would soon learn that such a consciously abbreviated way of speaking English was often necessary to be understood as I found myself learning how to more clearly communicate with those around me, now saying “Oh! Mangoes” instead of “those Mangoes look good” to the fruit-seller nearby the volunteer house. Although I was a new volunteer, and John had seniority over me, I had not only been to Africa before, but I’d studied Africa, I seemed to know Africa, or at least the sociopolitical and historical issues that flow within and without Africa, in a way that the other volunteers did not. It seemed, when John and I first met, that I would not automatically respect him like the other volunteers, mainly undergraduates, would. John seemed to also realize that I would have access in Ghana, because of the brown skin and thick hair that I call Black, that he had to work months to acquire, that it seemed that my friendship with Freeman and Eric was automatic, we didn’t even need to know other to understand each other, that the Ghanaians were intrigued with me in a way that seemed *different*, as the one older woman who looked deep into my eyes as she asked “Are you an American Negro?” Yet I was frustrated with John because he knew that I wanted the answers, the access, the secret passwords, and know-hows that he possessed. He seemed to haze me in order to grasp at it. I had to clamor to accompany him to Senya; in order to follow him into that Ghana that exists in the nighttime when the rest of the volunteers choose to stay in I carried the heavy water bags from the store to the house, navigating the darkness, trying to avoid the holes in the road. I had to acknowledge that my knowledge and understanding was finite and that there were certain answers, like how the Christian church is a cultural-economic institution, that one can only acquire through experience.

John, what John represents, forced me to grapple with how even though his whiteness and maleness implicated him into the neocolonial and patriarchal framework that gave him legitimacy, that allowed Ghanaian community leaders to defer and listen to his ‘expertise’, this did not take away the fact that perhaps he was doing good for the community, that, at the end of the day, a school was built and he made the poor Ghanaians in Senya feel acknowledged, and legitimate, that, whiteness and problematic histories do not negate humanity, human connections, that, sometimes “the critique”

can only extend so far, can only account for so much, it cannot touch everything, because, sometimes we exist in the cracks, love is always in the cracks, love is always in the cracks—we still exist—it happened—we must live—and development and progress is slow, that, sometimes, (their) needs comes before (our) political desires (to live), that, emancipation is incomplete, that, whiteness still maintains and is still loved and is still loved, that, there is still repetition (always repetition), and that as Black men we sometimes put anger before reality, before *what is*, that, its possible to be jealous, perhaps I was just jealous, I was jealous, and ambivalent, ambivalently jealous.

There was also a girl involved, but we'll get to her—Chloe from Connecticut College who came to Ghana after studying abroad in London—later. For now relevant Tweets from writer Teju Cole, published March 8th 2012.

The world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs —of white people and Oprah.

The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.

Feverish worry over that awful African warlord. But close to 1.5 million Iraqis died from an American war of choice. Worry about that.

I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.

I empathize with what Teju Cole rapidly published in response to the #stopKony campaign, but I can also acknowledge that, perhaps, the poetic, angry critiques that he, and I, so honestly write is perhaps the making of when a writer who lives in a world of ideas and histories, passions, individuals, and thoughts that float and only occasionally settle, before retreating back from the day-to-day flesh of the world, tries to do, to engage, in politics. Of course Baldwin/Fanon/whomever can critique civil rights/anti-colonial leaders for compromising, but they, unfortunately, were not the ones who sat in front of congress/the former colonizer/de Klerk when the decisions were being made (I'm thinking of, for instance, how Bayard Rustin seemed to concede when seated in front of congressional microphones). I did not have the gonads to ever suggest that the volunteers I lived with, ate with, stressed with, even laughed with had some type of 'white savior complex', and I really did not have the desire to. It was the day John was leaving, packing the last of his few belongings. I

stayed out of the room that day, giving him some space. One of the girls came outside to sit with me and remarked how sad it was that John was leaving, how he was “going home to nothing.” I never deeply thought about how John was close to 27, a bit older than the rest of us, or how he explained that he went to community college in Colorado, and that this was really his first time traveling extensively out of the United States. I didn’t really deeply consider what it meant—if anything—that he felt comfortable around Black people. I didn’t really consider that his reluctance of me could have stemmed from the fact that I can be a quietly outspoken 22 year old in graduate school who decided to come to Ghana for the summer and not simply that my skin was brown. I didn’t consider how John turned volunteering in Ghana into a career. I knew his motivations were authentic, but Ghana was more than just a break for him. So even when John would condescendingly complain how he had to teach Ghanaians accounting skills that seemed basic, I wouldn’t diagnose him with a white savior complex, as he was just another individual caught up in a world that often requires one traveling across that world to feel needed and understood.

Could I say that one cannot fully understand humans until one understands humans as human? The white savior industrial complex, not to forgive it, nor to exorcise it, is perhaps a misguided way of attempting to become human, to *be* humanely human, after so many years, so many years—colonialism, enslavement, ancestors we won’t forget—of denying that we are one of the earth, the soil, and the womb.

One afternoon Jackie from Cornell and I were walking around Peacetown, the neighborhood that surrounded the volunteer house. The neighborhood is composed of winding dirt roads that can seem almost nonsensical when you first attempt navigating them, but, after getting lost a few times, the routes begin to become more clear, and you can even eventually experiment with new ways of getting around the neighborhood. When walking I used a series of landmarks to make sure I was going the right way, noting to turn right at mango seller, to continue straight past the field where the guys play football, to follow the trail of rocks when the road got too muddy or wet. During the first few weeks of volunteering, it would take so long for me to get from the volunteer house to the volunteer office that I would show up at 8 or 9 am completely drenched in sweat, there was no

subtlety either, my face shiny and my shirt visibly soaked. I would hope that I would have a few moments to cool down, but some days we went directly from the office into town, so I would literally sit down for two minutes before starting another thirty minute walk to town to catch a taxi. I quickly accepted my unglamorous state of being replete with muddy shoes and sweaty shirts. While Jackie and I were walking, I was unabashedly venting to him, essentially yelling, about various frustrations I was having with some of the people in the house. There were two people, other than Freeman, that I felt comfortable talking about race, colonialism, capitalism, etc. with: Megan from Kentucky and Jackie. Sometimes I felt ambivalent about how they were subject to my intellectual or political tirades, but I realized that they were learning and growing as I helped clarify things that they too were unsure about. Megan one day did say that I did seem as if I was angry with her, and I had to explain that I wasn't angry with her specifically, I was just angry. I was angry about whiteness in Ghana, I was angry about the futility of volunteering, and the self-congratulatory humanitarianism in which we fixed 'problems' that only we deemed to be 'problems', I was angry because I was hungry all the time, I was angry because I seemed anti-social when I choose not to partake in binge television watching, I was angry that Lauren and some of the other volunteers forced our cook, Angie a Ghanaian woman, to make cheap dry pasta, with no protein or nutritional value, because they were "craving" it, I was angry at how some of the Ghanaians seemed to grovel to satisfy the demands of the volunteers, including myself, smiling and jiving for the whiteness that I felt complicit in—I was just angry and sometimes I needed to talk about it.

I was tired of just thinking about it. I honestly assumed that because Jackie went to Cornell that he would be able to "go there" intellectually with me, that I would be able to speak without explaining all the assumptions and positions that are behind my utterances, without explaining *why* I say what say, I assumed that it would just make sense. But Jackie would even tell me that I was getting too 'philosophical' for him, that he was just a public health major, and he would seem skeptical of some of my more overtly political or racially-conscious opinions, especially regarding how I felt his "public health" volunteering was in no way disconnected from politics, economics, and history, just as the "child labor project" was, no matter how hard he wanted to believe otherwise. We were walking and having this conversation and finally Jackie admitted that he liked to "stay in the present" that "history is history" and that it is something that he could do nothing about. I realized that the idea of staying

in the present and viewing history as irrelevant was a mechanism of capitalism, racism, sexism, etc. the ideas that seem to suggest Africa and the Global South are just poor because of their own faults, as if global capital flows and underdevelopment had nothing to do with it, as if colonialism did not happened, I realized that Jackie's "staying in the present" worked alongside the problematic idea of "post-racialism" as if we have simply moved passed the historical epoch of racism and apartheid to a point in which race has lost its potency. I realized that to "stay in the present" is to articulate a type of problematic "pragmatism" or "practicality" that makes those interested in the complexities, intangibilities, and historically imbedded aspects of human life out to be superfluous, impractical, and silly purveyors of victimology and affirmative action demands like the caricatures that Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson have become. I realized that Jackie wasn't really interested in "going there" with me, that he was comfortable with the fact that he came to Ghana without knowing anything about it beyond that it was poor, that he was comfortable with unconsciously acting, that he was cool with watching *House* during the evenings, with not taking things so seriously, that he was cool with how some of the volunteers found him—the short naïve Asian kid with glasses—so gosh darn funny, even laughing when some of the Ghanaians would exclaim "Ching Chong Ching Chong" upon seeing him walk down the street. It wasn't funny. I realized how the desire to "fit in" can be so overwhelming, so strong, especially as twenty-somethings, that it can overcome any political allegiances, the ideas and beliefs that we stand for or against become tolerated and comprised in the pool of the status quo, of "normality", that the seemingly unwavering politics of activists and scholars of yesterday now seem archaic and cliché, that it is 'normal' to hear a capitalistic thought from someone who ostensibly stands against capitalism, that it is 'normal' to listen to misogynistic lyrics, even repeating them aloud, despite knowing better because we are often unsure of whether another option, another way-of-being, that is *not* misogynistic, exists, for it is 'normal' to choose fun over politics, hedonism over self-control, procrastination and passivity over action.



(So many Peace Signs)

Jackie and I with some guys
from the neighborhood

Material Focus and the Loss of Optimism

The above photograph of Jackie, I, and some neighbor kids that would demolish us in a game of football in the front yard of the volunteer house is interesting in how it is multilayered, an assemblage of multiple components, intermingling together to produce what can be seen as both a single idea, or multiple ideas resting next to each other. At the forefront of the image is the multicultural, multinational togetherness produced by international traveling and volunteering. The establishment of human connections across boundaries of difference is represented, as five individuals from all walks of life, an immigrant, rich, poor, and in-between, languages, ages, and worldviews are joined together in a disregard of difference. Yet materiality surrounds that togetherness, the unfinished buildings resting behind us, the socioeconomic conditions of the young boys—the neighborhood kids often play at all times of the day because many of them did not attend a formal school, and they would often ask us for satchels of our sanitized water, a pouch that costs less than a dime was often out of reach for them. Materiality can be extended even deeper as the light poles that have been stuck in the ground and the debris from the construction sites evidences how the processes of destructive urbanization, development, and industrialization are taking place at the expense of the natural environment, ourselves included as we breathe in the fumes from the onslaught of shoddily running automobiles and construction equipment that are always packed tight in Kasoa. Even the clothes that we are wearing were most likely cheaply produced by individuals like those in the picture, who live in the Global South. I know for a fact that the company that produced the shirt that I am wearing has been under fire for apparently underpaying Latino immigrants working in sweatshirts in California. Even the fact that I am relatively tall means I have had access to

nutrition; I would come to find that I would be teaching students as tall as some of the boys in the photograph who would be sixteen years old, their physical development stunted because of the materiality—the economics, the politics—of their existence.

I mention these points not to reveal in the political-economic, but to attempt to transition, to begin to move, to a different place of emphasis. In Ghana, at least during my first few weeks, my anger, my frustration was due in part to the materialities of the modes of existence I encountered there—the poverty, the residuals of colonialism, the poverty. I could not see past those materialities, those economics, those politics, those ideas that I learned in class about neoliberalism, about neocolonialism, and underdevelopment were manifesting in front of my eyes. I was walking on paths already sketched out for me, the trajectories were foretold, I knew what to expect and Ghana, or did I, fulfilled those expectations. Yet, I feel, I felt, that I lost track, that I lost sight, of what I originally thought I believed. I believed that the ‘human’ was possible, that it was ‘possible’ to love across boundaries of difference, that it was possible to articulate a vision of the world that was grounded on humanity and not parochialism. Yet, upon seeing the whiteness, seeing the poverty, the angry arose, and I reveled in the material. The books that I brought with me, making my bag heavy, on cosmopolitanism (Appiah), on Black travel writing (Farah Jasmine Griffith), gradually lost relevance (I gave Freeman my vintage copy of *The Fire Next Time*) as I begin to turn to the work of the admittedly pessimistic Saidiya Hartman on her bitter, fussy time in Ghana despite the warnings of Janis Mayes (who probably saw the potential for pessimism smoldering before my eyes and words). I not only held no romantic ideas about Pan-Africanism or ‘coming home to Ghana’ I began to lose my romantic ideas about travel and volunteering. I saw the whole exercise as futile and like the existentialist living in bad faith that I can be in the darker moments, I completed tasks even while believing in their irrelevancy—that nothing really matters—as if structures and institutions hold ultimate sway and are impermeable to the individual actions of human beings.

Yet, I have always been aware of the intangible contradictions between existentialism, and also strictly materialist approaches, and Blackness. Blackness is something that is always spiritual, something that exceeds categories that exceeds the body and the structure. To believe in Blackness is to believe, it is to believe that the world can be better, that nightmares will end, that healing is possible, that there is infinite potential in togetherness, that everyone matters, especially the

criminalized, the stigmatized, the brutalized, that the symbolic holds potential even if it lacks substance. For those with 'analytical' or 'rational' minds, Blackness forces them to fit the irrational, the avant-garde, and the non-linear—essentially the creative—into their 'ordered' schemas of the world. In order to *be* in Ghana, to dwell and not wander, I had to step out of my head, to accept the economic conditions for what they were, to accept those around me, to begin to even accept my place in the world, to stop categorizing Ghana politically, and to differentiate between the *fact* of whiteness/blackness from the *lived experience* of the white or the Black individual. This is what Fred Moten calls: "the strain of being-imaginative and not-being-critical" in a 2007 presentation on *Black Optimism/Black Operation*, continuing,

Seeking out the state is all bound up with frowning on things. [...] Seeking out the state is a kind of piety. I worked in prisons. So did I. I talk with the spirits. I seek out the state.

Puritanism hurtles towards secularism. An all too verifiable past, lives crowded with incident, smothered by precedent.

I like Fred Moten's writing not only because he is a poet—unapologetically abstract and imprecise—big boned and soft spoken in person, but also because there is jovialness, his words go forward, then backwards, only to then disappear. For this green graduate student, I often wonder precisely to whom and in where he is talking. It should now be clear that his writing influenced my previous thoughts, that perhaps the last passage can be seen as a response, a homage, to Moten, alongside other writers like Cornel West who finds Blackness to be a tragicomedy, writing in *Black Strivings In a Twilight Civilization*:

Black culture consists of black modes of being-in-the-world obsessed with black sadness and sorrow, black agony and anguish, black heartache and heartbreak without fully succumbing to the numbing effects of such misery – to never allow such misery to have the last word.¹¹⁴

So, in what I anticipate to be the final passages of this meditation on my time in Ghana, I hope to attend to the everyday moments in which human connections were made possible, the moments in

¹¹⁴ West, Cornel. "Black Strivings In a Twilight Civilization." *The Cornel West Reader*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas, 1999. 102. Print.

which transformation or togetherness seemed to appear, the moments in which the material was subsumed into the background as the fugitive moments of possibility arrived.

First, one more Fred Moten quote:

Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question? Not simply to be among his own; but to be among his own in dispossession, to be among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything.¹¹⁵

The Ocean in the Daytime/The Ocean at Night

That Saturday, four of us woke up early, 5 or 6 am to catch a tro-tro mini bus taxi to the beach. It would be the first time that the new volunteers would venture out on their own, navigating Kasoa and the mini bus taxi system without instruction. I packed terribly for the trip: one towel, one bottle of water, a cliff protein bar, and a book of essays by the Egyptian writer Andre Acimen being nostalgic and meandering, ruminating for pages on colors and smells, that was only slightly interesting. I purchased a pair of counterfeit Ray-Ban sunglasses somewhere in town. In Ghana, at least in my experiences, there was really no swimming in the ocean. The part of the ocean that we would swim in was filled with litter. Instead of seaweed getting caught on your foot, you would emerge with a black plastic bag wrapped around your leg and a sinking feeling in the center of your stomach when someone would warn you about excrements in the water. So we instead laid on the beach. Once again I tried to act nonchalant about the rather awkward situation I found myself in. See, I was traveling with three white young women who had no problem lying on the beach for hours on end tanning. I, however, did not really need to tan and found myself quite bored with alternating between the single text that I brought and staring into the crystal blue sky. I eventually decided to walk around the empty beach, we were literally the only people there, and so I climbed the huge rocks, peered inside miniature caves, collected seashells, and scorched my feet on the hot sand. It was one of those rare moments that a six-foot tall skinny brown man, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts about a foot long, can act like child, or at least a teenager. Soon, the girls joined me in

¹¹⁵ *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. By Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Minor Compositions (96) Print.

my frolicking, one of them with a ferocious sunburn that we tried not to laugh about. Even though there was not intense conversation on the beach, I can remember many past moments of debating the meaning of life while staring at the ocean, I feel like the four of us became a little bit closer in our shared presence under the sun. We were all fatigued from working over the past week and it was nice just to lay there in a silence punctuated only by nature with no cellphones, no distractions, just our beings.



Beach Front in Fettesh 1

Taking the mini bus taxis can be exhausting in its chaos, the exhaust, the traffic, and bumpy roads, all while crammed into a back seat with a ceiling so low that I must lower my head. But our night was just beginning, tonight was the infamous ‘reggae night’. Lena, the German volunteer was teeming with excitement, even though most of us did not know what to expect but simply welcomed a change of scenery and the chance of meeting new people. There was also a new volunteer in the house, Chloe who had just finished studying abroad in London. She was sitting on the couch when I came into the living room after rinsing off the sand on my body with the drips from faucet. I decided to dress casual, a pair of dark jeans and a t-shirt. I sat next to her and initiated small talk. She didn’t lift her head off of the couch cushion but simply cocked it to the side to look at me. We hit it off right away, meaning she laughed at my jokes, meaning she attended a liberal arts college in the states and was “socially conscious” meaning she empathized with Black stuff. She was also another social science/humanities major working on the ‘child labor project’. I didn’t go into details about my experiences so far because she told me she would be working in Ghana for the next *three months* (do your research, people). The volunteers split up into two taxis, and inside the taxi I was in there was an evangelical female pastor preaching a sermon to all those going out on the town.

I was seated right behind her. She looked me right in the eye, asking, if “I was saved?” if “I drunk alcohol?” if “I accepted Christ as my savior?” I was overwhelmed. The trip to Accra could be over an hour long, so I did not want to say anything that might further provoke her. John, and the other volunteers sat in the backseat snickering as the lady looked sternly at me, channeling every Black woman who has ever scared me throughout my life. So I decided not to say anything at all. I sat there in silence, as if I could not tell she was talking to me, or feel the droplets of spit hitting my face as she annunciated her words. “Huh?!” she implored. The sweat was pulling my shirt to my chest. I let my eyes glaze over, and stared out of the window. Eventually realizing that she was not going to get a response from me, she turned to the other passengers in the car. The other volunteers talked about how much they respected me for keeping silent, but on the inside I felt deeply conflicted about possibly disrespecting an elder, a Black woman elder at that. I felt like it was one of those instances in which one acts differently around white people then one would act around Black people, but of course there is no way of knowing how that situation might have played out had everyone in the taxi been Black.

After John got into an argument with the taxi driver over a fare that was miniscule in the larger scheme of things, we navigated through a neighborhood lit only by fire pits, a large group of white people, and me, walking through the darkness as the residents watched us. Eventually we arrived to a beach and walked in. There were obrunis (white people) everywhere as it slowly dawned on me that this was an *expatriate* hangout spot, a place where Europeans, Americans, and Australians can get together abroad, speak English, and hang out with middle class Ghanaians. Aye! It made sense now. Lena even had a German friend group that was there. The atmosphere was admittedly cool: there was a tree house, the dark ocean resting in the distance, live music, and a diverse crowd.

There’s always a moment when I am abroad in which the people around me, after we’ve broken the ice and become relatively friendly, thinks its ok to ask me to buy them drugs, because I’m a Black male and it would be easier for me to do so. This honestly has happened to me in South Africa and Paris, and it would happen to me again in Ghana that night. They wanted me to go talk to the Rastafarian because they were all too scared to do it. It was still early into my time in Ghana, and I did not want to come across uptight. So I grudgingly went over to go talk to one of the Rastafarians. He knew what I was coming over for, because he saw the group of people that I was with.

When I arrived to his table, he gave me the Ghanaian Black handshake with the snapping move that I was getting used to. He then told me to follow him. I looked back at the volunteers, asking with my eyes whether I should follow the Rasta. They were amused at the novelty of the moment and fanned the air to push me to go. I followed the Rasta to the outside of the main area. There were other Rastas hanging around outside and it was considerably darker. I felt ambivalent. Even though I knew that I should ‘trust’ and ‘respect’ my Black ‘brothers’ I also knew how easily I could be robbed, and was grateful that I only had a few cedi with me. As we were walking the midnight ocean that was only steps behind the main area struck me. There were no lights on the beach. The dark ocean is both fascinating and terrifying to me, at once beautiful but utterly unknown and vast, its capacity to kill, literally swallow, the single human being is made potently clear when the sun is not dazzling upon the water. The Rasta and I made small talk as we walked. He introduced me to the other people along the way, who equally gave me strong handshakes, and seemed genuinely open, genuinely happy in their eyes, smiles, and demeanors. The Rastafarians in Ghana would make my default skeptical, alienated-from-nature, slightly anxious American way of being seem all the more a product of industrialization and the fragmentation of social life, as they all seemed so in tune with nature, with each other, and with Blackness (despite some patriarchal moorings). They were open to conversing with this young Black American and I am quite comfortable saying that the strongest sense of Pan-Africanism I experienced in Ghana came from the Rastafarian. Eventually we reached the destination and the Rasta even purchased papers and rolled the dry *daka* leaves for the volunteers. Freeman would later tell me that most Ghanaians strongly dislike marijuana and that the Rastafarian were often subject to increased policing, often stopped while traveling, their vehicles raided and belongings strewn about the street. In 2012, a joint military-police team demolished a Rastafari school called the NEGUS I Afrocentric Academy and a Mosque in Tema Community 22 without any advance notice, abusing many of the students in the process. Perhaps, this is why Moten says that “puritanism hurdles towards secularism” in that the spiritual aspects of the Rastafarian existence is totally neglected in favor of a prudish Christianity that is most likely working to showcase Ghana as a good, Christian, free-trade democracy to the Western world just as much as the Ghanaians named “Jason” and “Mary” exemplify. The Ghanaian university students that I worked with would even find my natural hair Afro and my shorts to be signs that I, too, was a ‘vagabond’, telling me that I should “cut my hair” “shave my beard” and “wear pants”, instructions I

did eventually follow. One can feel conflicted about how the Rastafarians hang out with the Obrunis, even developing informal economies and social lives around expatriate hangout spots. But it is quite clear that a lot of the people volunteering in Ghana, myself included, are seeking to escape the rigidity of Western life, and more so hurdle towards counter-capitalistic culture: sustainable, self-organized, modest consumption, and thus, fit alongside the Rastafarian ethos. Sometimes I could not fully stand next to the Rastafarian: after some of my friends had left for a moment, leaving me on the beach, one of the Rasta asked me to hook him and his friends up with some of the white girls that I was with. I wasn't sure if I was being 'overly paranoid' but I was offended at what they were suggesting and it made me question whether they were only hanging out with *that* in mind, whether then just for the sake of friendship as I had originally thought (sigh, naivety). Later on during Reggae night, there was a fire dancer who moved to traditional drums while swinging a burning stick of fire. Most people crowded around to watch, cheering exuberantly. I drifted over out of curiosity, but I could not handle how reminiscent it was of Black colonial entertainment and his performance of what came across as savagery. I quickly left the area to sit by myself until it was over. The sounds of the drums rattled in the distance.



Schoolchildren after a football game 1

Capitalistic Pan-Africanism/Thinking Beyond

I have always been skeptical of human connections that are wrapped up in capitalism or consumerism. It makes me question how authentic that relationship is, how 'real' is the person treating me. I often deliberate over how if we stepped outside of the capitalistic relationship then

there would be no relationship in the first place, as we would never just talk to each other on the street. There are days in which the only strangers I speak to are behind a counter. Capitalistic relations have become unfortunately predominate as many of our everyday relationships are bounded to the confines of work and consumption. Anyone familiar with the history of Blackness and domestic labor knows that this can be problematic, as workers from Black women domestic workers to South African miners have been erased, made invisible, confined to the confines of their labor, as their humanity, composed of individual lives, families, passions, and fears were made irrelevant due to the idea of a laborer, a Black laborer specifically, an idea that comes out of the history of enslavement.

In Ghana, I was initially bothered that the idea of Pan-Africanism seemed to be so bound up with, and appropriated by, capitalistic relations. There were large billboards throughout Accra that talked about Pan-African banking through thinly veiled ideas of free-trade economics and neoliberalism that were actually keeping the residents of West African countries, e.g. Nigeria, poor, working to the contrary of the economic (socialist-democratic) Pan-Africanism espoused by Nkrumah. What bothered me most, however, was how most Ghanaian men seemed to employ a Pan-African ideal, calling me 'Brother', only when they wanted me to buy something from them. The sellers at the market would yell "Brother" at me and literally chase me throughout the marketplace, grabbing my wrist and showing me things that the other "Black Americans" purchased before. They quickly dropped my wrist and applied Pan-African guilt when I chose not to buy anything. One problem with making the voyage to Ghana as a 22 year old and not a 30 or 40 year old with a 'real job' is that buying a large amount of souvenirs was not really possible. I wasn't really sure how to make that clear to Ghanaians who would often become angry and resentful of me after I continued to refuse to make a purchase. I was even at the center of a fight between two marketplace sellers. Emotions ran high as two different sellers tried to compete with each other for a purchase from me. A woman was eventually pushed and ended up chasing after the pusher-man with a pair of scissors. Luckily, the rest of the marketplace laughed to convey that it wasn't as serious as it seemed to our petrified faces.



Diane 'bean lady' and I

It was the 'bean lady', a Ghanaian woman named Diane that first forced me to reconsider human connections that are bound up in a transaction. I was first met Diane with John, who told me that her 'red-red', a dish made of beans, pepper, and fried plantains, was some of the best in the neighborhood. My agreement was expressed in how often I went to her house. She cooked the food right outside of her front porch during lunchtime. Even though the human connection was bound up in me purchasing her food, it was a relationship nonetheless as I spent time with her and her family as they asked me questions about being a Black American and I asked them questions about life in Ghana. When they found out that I was a 22-year-old working on a Masters degree with my own apartment in the States they were shocked that I wasn't married by now, because apparently I was prime material. Hanging out with Diane, the bean lady, and her family under the hot Ghanaian sun provided a welcome break from sitting in the Cheerful Hearts Office, in which I was so bored that I once wrote a poem on my iPhone expressing it one afternoon:

An Office Scene

Sitting in the office
 Slouched in a seat
 of
 Wood and psychedelic fabric
 Private jokes fly over heads
 In languages I/we/I don't understand
 Busy busy, keyboards clatter
 Brows furrowed
 Feigning interest
 Fans blowing up yesterday's dust

Drying off pastel colored shirts
 With gazes unfocused
 I/we/I
 Question existence

Departure/ Night Prior

I never fully unpacked my belongings in Ghana. I, actually, couldn't unpack my belongings between living with two to three other guys and the unfinished state of the single wardrobe. Jackie and I lived out of our luggage, storing our dirty clothes on the sides of our beds until it was time to hand wash our t-shirts and shorts in the backyard. I was glad that I packed economically and did not have a ton of clothes to groggily sort through each morning. I could not spend too much time getting dressed in the morning for I needed time to go the kitchen to drink two to three satchels of water that would quickly become sweat and scavenge for some type of protein sustenance. Often it was an egg fried by Douglass, the midnight complexioned younger brother of the director of Cheerful Hearts home from university who made the women in the house swoon, or peanut butter, a spoonful from the jar. Douglass, like many of the Ghanaians I met, laughed easily. A single glance at my often incredulous facial expressions at my fellow volunteers would cause Douglass to burst out laughing. He seemed to know exactly what I was thinking, as in *"did this person really just say they've never heard of reggae music?"* In the summer months, Douglass lived in the volunteer house to work as a program assistant. One night, he told me of a past summer when an older Black American woman traveled to Ghana alone and how he accompanied her everywhere she went to help her avoid oily foods and aid in her mobility. I didn't know how to fully express it to Douglass, but that story was profound: a connection both transnational (space) and inter-generational (time). I even thought about tracking her down, she lives somewhere in Florida, to talk about her experiences volunteering. Although Douglass and I laughed together throughout my time in Ghana, we weren't especially close. While Freeman and I would talk about everything from hip-hop to neocolonialism, I, honestly, never had an in-depth conversation with Douglass. Of course, I was able to grow closer to Freeman because he worked on the child labor project, and it was him, Megan, Chloe, and John that I was around the most.

If the child labor crew was anything we were ambitious: our project was the least concise and often intangible compared to those on the public health program. We were required to be self-guided and

creative. I continually advocated for the need of empirical research on the fishing communities we worked in. Although it was superficially apparent that the communities were poor we really did not understand specifically *why* these communities were poor, especially in relation to broader political-economic forces. We lacked an understanding of the histories, the makings of the places we worked in. Further, I was curious about the true viability of formal education for residents of very poor communities where the likelihood of continuing through secondary education into college was slim: why was the vocational education provided on the fishing boats prematurely dismissed as problematic? I was even interviewed by and invited to share my critiques with development organizations in Washington DC. I was not looking for aspects to critique just to crave a niche for myself, but did so with a sincere concern that we were working blindly, that we identified problems without the community's consent, and that there was a lot to learn from the residents: the men who have been going out on the boats for years, the women who smoke the fish, the children that watch, listen, and learn.

Because the child labor crew was small, it was intimate and my forthcoming departure felt poignant and sudden. The girls did not mind admitting this, often reminding that they did not want me to leave, or even that they wished they were leaving too during the moments when Ghana proved rough and disorienting. Even though I felt sad—a word that does not fully capture my emotions at the time but must suffice—about leaving, I tried not to let on, simply acting as if it was another matter of life. I always knew I was saying for only part of the summer, it was part of the previously inspired externship plan I concocted with a professor in the spring months. I did feel ambivalent as I realized there were not enough weekends left for me to go camping in the forests of Cape Coast or Hohoe, to wake up in a tent while the ground was still wet, or to travel to the North of Ghana where the mining takes place and the Ashanti and Muslims live, or to see the place that John called paradise, and it might be a few years before I ever returned to Ghana because Africa is big and I still have a lot to see and a career to build and even though Jackie could be annoying he wasn't a bad friend, and Chloe's craziness kept me sane, and I was just learning all of my students' names and they learning mine and even though I was avoiding the news, I knew what was waiting for me back

in America, it would be hot and Detroit would be Detroit and I would be working there, no weekend escapes, no fugue in the trap¹¹⁶—I was broke.

John's flight out of Ghana was the day before mine so, during our last weekend, we celebrated together. Cheerful Hearts organized a big dinner for John and presented him an award for his service. Traditional Ghanaian food was planned, but due to a couple of mishaps we ended up at a Chinese restaurant in the Osu district. I had spent the day in Accra in a whirlwind of museums, as I had to see the W.E.B Dubois house and internment. After dinner was the real celebration, however, as we traveled a bit deeper into Accra and attended an outdoor concert, in which we were the only foreigners in attendance. The music was gorgeous, a family ensemble performing a hybrid of traditional, funk, and pop. Both the volunteers and the local Ghanaians had high expectations for me in terms of dancing. Even Freeman shed his typical intellectual, political, cool guy guise to dance with all of us. I decided to indulge after a bit and a little more and then some more liquid courage. I danced with the Portuguese volunteer who made me blush when she said my humor and dress seemed more European than American, sometimes. Probably because I wasn't like the Black Americans one sees on TV, no? It was late into the night when the band stopped performing and the exuberance among the volunteers was high. We followed a group of Ghanaians to a street somewhere in the city in which people gather in various states of drunkenness to yell at each other. I was feeling brave and decided to venture out into the street on my own. I wanted to pretend I could blend in with the rest of the crowd and not stick out with the volunteers. I was quickly spotted by another brother in the crowd who yelled out "What's up?!" and explained that he had been traveling in Morocco studying Arabic and decided to come West for a while. He introduced me to his group of friends who wondered where I had been hiding, "I live in Kasoa!" I yelled, thinking about how different that world was from the cosmopolitan Accra. The volunteers eventually found me and I was soon in a taxicab on the bumpy road drunkenly asking the driver: "So, how do you like Ghana?"

¹¹⁶ This word comes out of Southern slang. It could reference a place where drugs are sold, like a house or a street corner, but it could also reference the ghetto, or inner city broadly. It is the "trap" because many people there are stuck in a cycle of selling drugs and hustling to survive, and are therefore "trapped" and unable to leave and make a better life for themselves.



Beautiful Ghana / Thinking Beyond

Chapter 4: Detroit
Swerving throughout the Post-Industrial City

Thinking about the political possibilities (the problems) of affective objects

Opening Notes:

This chapter is not specifically about the literal act of riding throughout the city. I am instead thinking of the ideas of 'riding' and 'city' as points of departure from which I explore and meditate on a set of inter-connecting ideas, histories, and immediacies that reside at the nexus of the post-industrial city, Blackness, and mobility. If I were forced to summarize the chapter under one broad idea, I would say that it is a negotiation of looking for good in a bad situation. Kind of like the blues. I find myself unable to speak of fugitivity without captivity; of life without death; of revitalizing Detroit without acknowledging how many see Detroit as a dead city; of the automobile as medium for transgressive freedom rides without speaking of how the automobile and the freeway helped kill Detroit and aids in the destruction of the Earth; and, finally, of the positive aspects of hip-hop music without its role in solidifying the supposed 'criminality' of Blackness, particularly Black males.

This chapter began as an attempt at optimism as I looked for a way to think about Detroit, hip-hop music, and car culture as positive and transformative. It was an attempt to think about Blackness and Black social life beyond mainstream or dominant interpretations. Did I succeed in doing so? Possibly. I find myself holding the current opinion that Black social life is hard, if not impossible, to decipher when peering at it with the eyes of whiteness. I'm not sure if I have Black eyes, and I feel more comfortable with the idea that I am still teaching myself how to read and see and love Blackness beyond stereotypes. The work of Frantz Fanon makes clear that one's possession of Black skin does not necessarily mean that one's consciousness has been cleared of oppressive, denigrating ideas of Black life. As Abdul Jan Mohammed writes in "Negating the Negation":

The most crucial aspect of resisting the hegemony consists in struggling against its attempt to form one's subjectivity, for it is through the construction of the minority subject that the dominant culture can elicit the individual's own help in his/her oppression.¹¹⁷

The assumption throughout the world of the criminality of Black men is a tremendous problem that needs to be honestly and empathetically addressed. A group of Black men riding around Detroit listening to music may be a mode of social life, of togetherness, and escape, but that ride will always

¹¹⁷ Jan Mohamed, Abdul R. "Negating the Negation as a Form of Affirmation in Minority Discourse: The Construction of Richard Wright as Subject." *Cultural Critique* No. 7. The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II (1987): 245-66. JSTOR. Web. Apr. 2014.

be seen as criminal, they are already on trial and simply can only hope to evade the various manifestations of the law of racism so that they can stay alive, or out of prison.

I won't say that this chapter is for them, however, those Jordan Davises of the world.¹¹⁸ Because it isn't. This chapter is for me, and by extension of the complexities of my being, it is for Detroit, a city that shows what happens when a fear of Blackness collides with bloody economics and market logic, and for Black males, because in critiquing Black male criminality, I am attempting to save myself as a Black male who is committed to moving through the world, and helping others escape from a lack of understanding and empathy, to help inspire and open imaginations to ways of being and thinking that exists beyond.

¹¹⁸ Jordan Davis, a 17-year-old high school student, was shot dead on November 23, 2012, in Jacksonville, Florida by Michael David Dunn, a 45-year-old. Dunn shot Davis and his companions after he asked them to turn down the purportedly loud music that was being played in the automobile in which Davis was a passenger.

Let us assume, with Wilderson, it is the case that *every* gesture, *every* performance of blackness, *every* act or action, critical or creative, rhetorical or aesthetic, is haunted by this sense of grammar and ghosts, of a structure and a memory of its (still) coming into being through and as violence. Does this haunting imply, much less ensure, that there is not and can be no fugitive movement of escape, as Moten has it?

[...] black social life does not negate black social death by inhabiting it and vitalizing it. A living death is as much a death as it is a living.¹¹⁹

As noted in the above quotes from Jared Sexton's work, the tensions elucidated are in regard to how the existence of Black life, of Black fugitivity, of being a Black escapee—which all take place 'underground and in outer space', beneath and beyond—do not the negate the *fact* of Blackness, that is, the fact of social death. Social death, an idea that comes out of the work of sociologist Orlando Patterson, primarily entails estrangement from mainstream or civil society and the dominant figure of the human being with rights and privileges. Social death is rather akin to what George Lamming describes as exile in *The Pleasures of Exile*, in which he declared, "The exile is a universal figure ... We are made to feel a sense of exile by our inadequacy and our irrelevance of function in a society whose past we can't alter, and whose future is always beyond us ... To be an exile is to be alive".¹²⁰ Frank Wilderson III and Saidiya Hartman, among others, emphasize that any performance of Blackness cannot be dislodged from the violent captivity from which it springs.¹²¹ Hartman puts it much more vividly, channeling Hortense Spillers in theorizing that the: "performance of blackness is inseparable from the brute force that brands, rapes, and tears open the flesh in the racial inscription of the body".¹²² The performance of Blackness is, then, relational, operating in relation to the various modes of anti-blackness and structural inequities. The modes that are of particular importance in this chapter include: criminalization, urban decay, and ghettoization due to neoliberalism, deindustrialization, and suburbanization. The criminalization of the Black male body, for instance, informs the performances, the very movements of Black males. It lurks behind every gesture, every utterance, every glance, and gives shape to the ways in which Black males navigate the spaces in which their lives unfold. Aime Ellis' work reiterates this as he focuses on "the myriad ways that

¹¹⁹ Sexton, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *InTensions Journal* 5 (2011).

¹²⁰ Lamming, George. *The Pleasures of Exile*. London: Michael Joseph, 1960. 24. Print.

¹²¹ Hartman, Saidiya V., and Frank Wilderson, III. "The Position Of The Unthought." *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 183-201. JSTOR. Web. Apr. 2014.

¹²² Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. p. 58. Print.

structures of power shape the behaviors, beliefs, and values of black men who desperately struggle to resist domination.”¹²³ What I am leading to with this, is the tension that exists within ‘riding in the post-industrial city’: although one is (fugitively) swerving away from the post-industrial city in creating and exercising life amidst social death, that fugitive passage in the automobile is indivisible from the conditions of its making. That passage does not depart, it does not escape, but remains inside to disproportionately risk unjust punitive measures and anti-Blackness at the turn of every corner, in the pause at every stoplight. Black automotive passages are always clandestine, always criminal, and the passengers are always on trial as long as they move inside an order, a geopolitical frame of conditions, which calls for its containment and imprisonment.

Back Story

To be frank, my initial interest in automotive movement in the post-industrial city did not have a political thrust. I was interested primarily in thinking through the body as a physiological site that can be affected by cultural forces, like music or literature. Further, I was interested in thinking about hip-hop music beyond what I saw as a superficial focus on lyrical meaning. I was, and remain, interested in how hip-hop beats are hugely complex, brilliant, and physiologically moving, as one can *feel* the beat in one’s chest before it reverberates throughout the rest of the body. In bringing in the theoretical framework of Black fugitivity, however, I began to consider the ways in which riding in the post-industrial city was a literal and intellectual mode of escape, not only in regards to the criminalization of Blackness and the denigration of Detroit, but also in how it is a thematic that goes beyond representation; that is, beyond what is (ostensibly) seen into a focus on what is experienced, what is *felt* in the everyday movements of the people who do not see Detroit just as ruins, but as home. Yet, viewing riding around the post-industrial city as a mode of fugitivity poses a few political problems for me. I, admittedly, sometimes lament the celebrations of the myriad methods and rituals that Black people have devised in order to survive and live amidst poverty and anti-Blackness. I see too many bleeding-heart liberals fawning over how street kids in Haiti are “break-dancing” their way out of despair, or how kids in Rio de Janeiro make art out of broken bottles and cans, or how the Negro woman can still sing a sweet song despite her sorrows, instead of critiquing the structural conditions that produced such misery in which those same liberals are complicit. I became

¹²³ Ellis, Aimé J. *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 2011. p. 16. Print.

concerned that I was romantically celebrating a method of survival, a mode of Black (fugitive) social life, while ignoring the social death that looms around it.

This rather cynical reluctance to celebrate small, human, moments of transcendence comes out of the high expectation of a complete revolution. That is, because these small moments do not result in a complete tearing down of the structures which ‘imprison’ and ‘destroy’ life I am less motivated to celebrate them, in addition to having grown further pessimistic as I watch acts of revolution and resistance become vacuumed into capitalism and imperialism as Pepsi or Johnson & Johnson celebrate diversity.

I find myself, once again, at the nexus of “being-imaginative” (acknowledging (fugitive) life) and “being-critical” (wallowing over social death). Fred Moten finds constantly escaping to be a ‘gift’, an ability to elude the structure even as it continues to morph and transform in response to new modes of fugitivity. Referencing the work of Daphne Brooks, Moten emphasizes that the history of abolitionism (an ongoing history) is “the history of an infinite set or line of quotidian ‘escape acts’ ”. In the same commentary, Moten poignantly writes, “Escape is not accomplished but is a thing(liness) we love.”¹²⁴

I remain stuck at how escape is not accomplished. Moten seems to rumble over that point to stress that we love escape despite what seems to be failure, to lightly echo recent anti-capitalistic claims that failure can be

beautiful.

What is an escape that does not leave?

What is an escape in which one remains in captivity?

What is an escape in which one dies trying to get outside,
to get away?

Did you make it? Are you there?

Maybe I’m just asking,

what is a dream

deferred?¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Fred Moten “Black Optimism” (unpublished essay)

¹²⁵ By: Calvin Walds

Jared Sexton will not allow us to forget the tension as we celebrate the escape. He stresses that although Moten is “interested in how black social life steals away or escapes from the law, how it frustrates the police power” we cannot neglect that “so doing”, that is, stealing or swerving away, “calls that very policing into being *in the first place*.”¹²⁶

From the 1992 film “Juice” (emphasis added)

We **run** from the cops,
 we **run** from Radames,
 we **run** from
 security guards,
 we **run** from Old Man Quiles
 and his bullshit store
 when he come
 with that bullshit gun.
 All we do
 is fuckin' **run**!
 I feel like I'm on
 the god damn track team.
 I'm serious!

The tension between the possibilities for escape and the violent conditions from which they have sprung became tangible, legible, to me quite soon after I arrived back in Detroit from Ghana.

I arrived back in Detroit in July, the peak of summer. Because Michigan has only about four months of really warm weather, the city in the summer is vibrant, as people come out of their homes and workspaces into the public arena, which is mainly centralized downtown but spreads throughout the intricate freeway system that connects the city. The freeways also contributed to the city's demise as it allows easy passages out of the city into the suburbs. I was raised on the far edge of Detroit, on the West side, on the *other* side of Telegraph, one of the many main streets in Detroit that divides whiteness from Blackness, poverty from middle class. The suburbs, then, are actually closer to my home than the central city, and so most of my social activities and education took place outside of Detroit. It was a beautiful Saturday. Both of my parents had prior engagements so I had the day to myself. I hadn't been back from Ghana for a week. After getting in touch with one my high school friends, I soon found myself on the freeway, the familiar experience making me keenly aware I was

¹²⁶ Sexton, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *InTensions Journal* 5 (2011).

back in Detroit. The freeway is inter-subjective, relational, a social space in which different individuals interact and communicate with each other through their vehicles. Inside the car is another inter-relational social space in which the passengers in the car interact with each other, while also interacting with the car, as the car speeds, the sounds that spill out of the stereo, the conditions of the road that delimit the car's movements act on the body and consciousness producing an interlocking set of interactions, a multi-scalar, human and non-human, sphere of multiplicities. Even though I loved and missed Ghana to the point that I was not yet prepared to talk about it, for it was too fresh, too near, I had missed riding in the city, missed its fast pace, the contemporary hip-hop music, even my friend's ostentatious display of wealth as he drove a new luxury car felt familiar. The day went well, but it was that night that changed me. You may think that I am leading to a story of how my friend and I got pulled over, or racially profiled, but I'm not. If you think back to July 2013, there was a moment that, arguably, changed everything.



I was sitting on the couch listening to music, my friend had fallen asleep, probably tired from working to afford the new car. My phone buzzed and I absently mindedly looked over to read it: “George Zimmerman Found Not-Guilty”.¹²⁷ My stomach hurt, my heart rate sped up, and I was suddenly hot. I had been assuming that the worst that could happen was his getting off with “manslaughter”. This didn’t make sense. It didn’t feel real. My phone buzzed again, it was my Mother. “Cal, where are you? Are you ok?” My Mother was born and raised in Detroit, and lived

¹²⁷ On February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida, United States, George Zimmerman fatally shot Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black high school student.

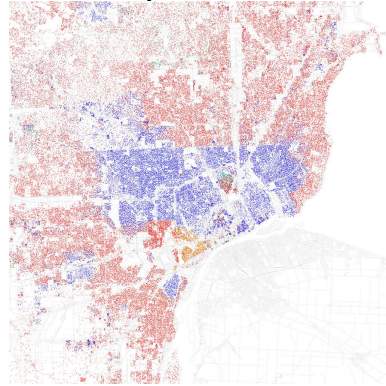
through the riots¹²⁸ and the long aftermaths. It was a hot Saturday night in Detroit and my Mother was well aware of what might result from virulent emotions. She wanted me to come home just as I was thinking about the dark realities of the national home I'd just returned to. I didn't want to wake my friend. I wasn't even sure if he would care as much as I did. If the BMW did not make it clear, there exists a slight, capitalistic, gulf between my high school friends and myself. I felt alone sitting on the couch, alone in my anger. An anger that was different than from anything I had experienced recently. Although I do get upset occasionally, after years of conditioning my emotions to fit within an institutional, socially mobile framework, I rarely experience unmitigated anger. To be quite blunt, in that moment, I was ready to go outside to tear shit up, or more accurately, tear shit down. I now understood how riots, or rebellions, could result in an implosion of violence. Faced with the sheer violent absurdity of Black life (that is, social death), Black people are often confined to destroying their own neighborhoods, their own people, and their own selves. Where else can one direct one's anger, where else can one explode? Anti-blackness and all its components are institutionalized yet dispersed; it does not lie in one individual or institution. What was I going to do, go downtown and riot at the City County Building? Drive crazily down the freeway trying to steal away from passion hoping that it dissipates into speed? In this dismissal of violence as futile, I was thinking, admittedly, like the intellectuals and commercial elites who Fanon wrote see the "impatient violence of the masses" as a "hopeless effort, an attempt at suicide" whereas, instead, he rebuked, "the violence of the native is only hopeless if we compare it in the abstract to the military machine of the oppressor" in *Wretched of the Earth*.¹²⁹ So I got on Twitter, a social networking site in which I am part of a community of scholars and activists. I needed to see, and feel other reactions. Twitter, at that moment, was full of anger, deep biting cynicism, disappointment and grief. Many people were worried, not only because of a possible uprising, but also in terms of the impact on the political and social imaginations of young people. The post-Obama nihilism that is reflected in hip-hop music coming out of places like Chicago was troubling enough.

¹²⁸ For the record, I believe that Detroit never recovered after the riots and I personally don't care to call it a "rebellion" as that seems to be a pretentious intellectual attempt to valorize something that sealed the city's demise, which, of course, is not to say that I blame Black people for what happened.

¹²⁹ Fanon, Frantz, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Constance Farrington. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 1965. p.65 Print.

2 Dimensions of Death: Urban and Social

Detroit is the most segregated city in America. The red dots show white people, blue is Black, orange is Hispanic, green is Asian, and yellow is other, according to Census maps of 2010.



What is it to live in the domain of non-existence, to inhabit an impossible time between life and death...?

Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland "Raw Life: An Introduction"¹³⁰

With the advent of 20th century Fordism, the American inner-city ghetto, a form of encampment, emerged as part of rapid urbanization. In the ghetto—which I envision as the blue parts of the map above—low-wage laborers could be accumulated for work in industrial manufacturing and personal services. The policed ghetto, a surveyed camp, concentrated the accumulated Black labor force in order to isolate them from the spatial apparatuses of white civil society. Loci Wacquant writes,

[Blacks] remained locked in a precarious position of structural economic marginality and consigned to a secluded and dependent microcosm, complete with its own internal division of labor, social stratification, and agencies of collective voice...a 'city within a city'...¹³¹

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Fordism began to restructure under neoliberalism, conservative free-market economic policies, and the opening of the neocolonial global marketplace in which there was a further pool of low-wage laborers to be exploited. As industry began to move overseas, the Blacks left in the Fordist ghetto—the burgeoning post-industrial city—faced complete social-economic abandonment that was underpinned by white exodus to the suburbs. Capital

¹³⁰ Sexton, Jared. "Raw Life: An Introduction." *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 53-62. JSTOR. Web. Apr. 2014.

¹³¹ Wacquant, Loci. "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration." *New Left Review*. 2002. Web. Apr. 2014.

investment bled out of the cities where industrial manufacturing had previously provided employment opportunities for Black people. The State, working under conservative, neoliberal economic and political policies, retracted social support and allowed public infrastructure to disintegrate. Mainly precarious forms of work remained in either the informal economy or low-wage service work, which contributed to what Wacquant terms the *desocialisation of wage labour* in which much of the working class becomes 'absolute surplus population' and there no longer remains a common temporal or social framework of life in the ghetto as there is a deterioration and dispersion of the basic conditions of employment. Those who remained in the ghetto were there because they had no way out. As rapper Wiz Khalifa eloquently states, "nig[.]as stranded where I'm from".¹³² Previous mechanisms of social support were almost completely dismantled. Wacquant terms the situation faced by Blacks in the post-Fordist ghetto (and also ghettos across the world) as one of *advanced marginality*.¹³³

Advanced marginality is increasingly disconnected from cyclical fluctuations and global trends in the economy [...] advanced marginality tends to be concentrated in isolated and bounded territories increasingly perceived by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous badlands at the heart of the postindustrial metropolis.¹³⁴

Advanced marginality provides a conceptualization of the social life that inhabits what Peter Eisinger envisions as urban death in his article "Is Detroit Dead?" He writes,

Urban death involves the withering or failure of crucial urban functions involving governance and economic opportunity, as well as the diminution of lesser functions such as cultural preservation and the provision of public spaces. The fulfillment of these is why people want to come together in dense concentrations; it is what makes a large place not simply a collection of many people, like a refugee camp, but rather a city, an urban place. It is quickly becoming hard to call Detroit a living city anymore.¹³⁵

As detailed in Thomas Sugrue classic book, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* the descent of Detroit from deindustrialization into advanced marginality and urban death began soon after World War II in which auto companies began to replace workers with machines, or move jobs to the suburbs and

¹³² Wiz Khalifa song "Medicated"

¹³³ Wacquant, Loci. "Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium." *Urban Studies* 36.10 (1999): 1639-647. Web.

¹³⁴ Wacquant, Loci. "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration." *New Left Review*. 2002. Web. Apr. 2014.

¹³⁵ Eisinger, Peter. "Is Detroit Dead?" *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36.1 (2014): 1-12. Print.

out of state, resulting in a decrease of 134,000 jobs between 1947-1963.¹³⁶ Sugrue explains how white Detroiters used violent tactics to protect racial privilege in the workplace and in neighborhoods in which Black families faced terror if they tried to move outside the inner city: windows shattered, car tires slashed, garages and homes set ablaze. White Detroit, then, ensured and reinforced Black ghettoization, which trapped Blacks in the city as it was being rapidly depleted of material and social resources. The spatial isolation of Blackness inside of Detroit contributes to the factors that negatively impact residents' health, from neighborhood instability to the lack of grocery stores and cultural institutions, from psychosocial stress to severed social networks, to inadequate health services. Detroit is a national leader in the rates of childhood asthma, blood lead levels and obesity.

Something's (Possibly) Wrong With the Car

The Dangerous (Possibilities) of Objects M o v i n g

When it was announced several years back that Detroit has the highest rate of overweight residents among US cities, former Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick faulted the car culture of the city and the surrounding suburbs, stating plainly: "We're not a walking city". Kilpatrick was correct: Detroit was and remains in many ways the Motor City. It is not the Motor City in a strong socioeconomic sense, unless one is speaking of Motor City Casino, but it is in terms of how its spatial layout gives rise to its culture of mobility. It is not hyperbolic to argue that it is close to impossible for many of the city residents to walk throughout its communities, even if they so desired. Entire neighborhoods are without sidewalks; the city and suburbs have been fragmented and dismembered from each other by traversing highways and intersections where it takes pedestrians ten minutes just to cross the street. Along huge sections of roadway walking is prohibited. Further, the workday in Detroit begins with a commute that usually lasts close to an hour. A full day of work in the low wage service industry involves sitting or standing in place, doing the same thing repetitiously. Another hour is consumed with the commute home. This is the most efficient method of squeezing the ultimate amount of labor power from people and the automotive manufacturers perfected it. Such conditions, in addition to the lack of nutritious and cultural sustenance in most of the city's neighborhoods beyond downtown, leave workers emotionally and physically drained. Most neighborhoods, in the 'livelier' parts of the city, include only churches, fast food restaurants, small stores with cheap unnecessary

¹³⁶ Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996. Print.

items produced in global south factories, perhaps a hair salon. The home—or the porch, the backyard, the liquor store—becomes a mere rest station. Detroit workers, the habitually unemployed or underemployed, sit still in a dull, listless, unblinking state of physical inactivity (immobility). One rarely sees people beyond the poor or vagrant walking the narrow, broken sidewalks that precariously border the streets that mirror highways, littered with vacant, hollowed lots and buildings.

In this section,

I want to reflect on 1) the problems with the car as an object caught up in a political economy of advanced marginality and social death and 2) the ethics of engaging the car as an analytical object, an object of inquiry.

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.¹³⁷

Does engaging the automobile, the car, as a repository of sensuous dimensions, a medium for transgressive freedoms and sociality, risk disconnecting the object from the labor that produced it? For the commodity is a product of “private labor and the social relations between the individual workers”. Does engaging the car as a vessel through which movement throughout urban, post-industrial space is made possible and transformative, a “distinctive form of urban life...with characteristic rhythm, concerns, and social interactions”¹³⁸, risk valorizing that object as something that transcends the ‘relations of its production’, allowing a “production of the human brain [to be] endowed with life”¹³⁹?

For Paul Gilroy, fetishizing “commodities produced by the... exploitative corporations that played such an important role in building the racial division of labor which characterized America’s

¹³⁷ Marx, K. (1928). The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret. In *Karl Marx Capital. A Critique of political Economy*. (p. 163-168). London.

¹³⁸ Patton, J. (2004). *Transportation Worlds: Designing Infrastructures and forms of Urban Life* (Unpublished PhD dissertation). p. 21. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

¹³⁹ Marx (1928)

industrial capitalism” is a result of the “amnesia-inducing properties of the car” in which one forgets the relations of production as the car transforms into “a kind of giant armored bed on wheels that can shout the driver’s dwindling claims upon the world into dead public space at ever-increasing volume”.¹⁴⁰ Gilroy’s 2001 article “Driving While Black” works to de-fetishize the automobile and its coveted role in Black material culture. Gilroy connects the automobile to the disintegration of transnational Black solidarity, as Black Americans (as well as Black Europeans, Black Africans...) drive cars that use oil siphoned from “areas in the developing world where oil companies have held human life and the biosphere in common contempt”¹⁴¹, as most notably seen in the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. There is the “neo-imperial dynamic” of the automobile, the white supremacist and anti-Semitic Henry Ford and the damaging impact cars have on urban environments. Gilroy argues that cars “damaged life of Black communities [and] helped produce a new conception of the street as a place of danger and violence rather than community, creativity and mutuality.”¹⁴² He corroborates this argument through emphasizing that although “for Blacks, driving themselves could be part of liberation from their apartheid...for whites, [the car] supplied a legitimate means of perpetuating and indeed compounding segregation.”¹⁴³ Gilroy follows with what may be his most poignant normative statement in the article: “White flight from urban centers was not just accomplished by means of the automobile, it was premised on it”¹⁴⁴.

De-fetishized, the car becomes paradoxical. One could see the automobile as a medium through which freedom and individuality could be materially expressed in one’s literal movement in a ride covered in meanings of ‘race-coded particularity’ expressed by rims, paint jobs, and even hydraulics. Conversely, the automobile catalyzed the development of freeways and highways that partitioned urban space, provided pathways for the exodus of whiteness and industry, and helped to “disseminate and popularize the absolute social segregation that once characterized the colonial city”

¹⁴⁰ Gilroy, P. (2001). Driving While Black. In D. Miller (Author), *Car cultures*. Oxford: Berg.

¹⁴¹ Gilroy, P. (2001) p.92

¹⁴² Gilroy, P. (2001) p.88

¹⁴³ Gilroy, P. (2001) p.94

¹⁴⁴ Gilroy, P. (2001) p.94

¹⁴⁵. Gilroy makes clear that he sees little redeeming value in the car and provides apt evidence that, at least for Black people, it has done much in the way of impeding freedom. The critiques of “automobility” and unexamined consumerism offered by Gilroy, and others like James Flink¹⁴⁶, Kristin Ross¹⁴⁷, can be devastatingly deadening for the American subject, a subject whose identity and conception of self is grounded in objects and consumerism that are unquestioningly tied to problematic sociopolitical inequalities, or, in a phrase, bloody economics. The phrasing “bloody economics” can be more than a description of what Henry Giroux calls a “savage market fundamentalism”,¹⁴⁸ however, and can be used as a way of *cursing* economics and materialist approaches for how they de-romanticize the objects in our lives, rendering problematic our positive relationships with them and the pleasures they provide. Most objects, especially in the aestheticization of technology, have “amnesia-inducing” properties through which we forget the collapsed sweatshops and geopolitical wars buried beneath our iPhones or favorite t-shirt.



The construction of the Chrysler Freeway (I-75) through Detroit, shown here on February 4, 1964, essentially destroyed Paradise Valley, a vibrant, predominantly Black neighborhood.

Feelings, Emotions, Mobilities

That is,
Neoliberalism

¹⁴⁵ Gilroy, P. (2001) p.93

¹⁴⁶ Flink, J. J. (1990). *The automobile age*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

¹⁴⁷ Ross, K. (1995). *Fast cars, clean bodies: Decolonization and the reordering of French culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁴⁸ Giroux, H. (2013, December 02). Hope in the Age of Looming Authoritarianism. *Truthout*.

Retrieved from <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/20307-hope-in-the-age-of-looming-authoritarianism>

Ascher states, “movement should also be a pleasure,”¹⁴⁹ in an echo of Lynch, (who argued “travel can be a positive experience; we need not consider it pure cost.”¹⁵⁰ Ole B. Jensen provides a summation of this turn in thinking, writing,

What is emerging is a new ‘aesthetics of mobility’. Such new aesthetics of mobility pave the way for an understanding of the potential of armatures [channeling flows and linking nodes in complex networks of distribution] to be appropriated by social agents creating alternative meanings, cultures and identities.¹⁵¹

Jensen is open to the aesthetics of mobility as it permits a focus on human experience and agency, a foray outside of strictly material concerns. But is the focus on the sensuous or affective dimensions of human experiences such as automotive mobility premature, for our senses have yet to be emancipated as part of the “abolition of private property”?¹⁵² As Lauren Berlant notes, “our senses...are bound up by the rule, the map, the inherited fantasy, and the hum of worker bees who fertilize materially the world we are moving through”.¹⁵³ The sensuous dynamics of human life, including affects, are bound with the relations of production, as the anxious, stressed worker would likely agree. It is simply that, as Todd Cronan writes, “like the fetishized commodity, [affects] make their dazzling appearance with the labor behind them obscured.”¹⁵⁴

Wanda Vrasti states, “the hegemony of late capitalism is being fought on territories...such as the personal, the affective, and the aesthetic”.¹⁵⁵ Corporations, governments, and other institutions of power have used emotional and affective orientation to steer subjects toward market rationality and pathways that lead to profits and maintenance of the status quo. As Tim Jenson writes, “Neoliberalism entrains us to experience certain emotions over others, suggests rules for their

¹⁴⁹ Ascher, François. "Multi-mobility, Multispeed Cities: A Challenge for Architects, Town Planners and Politicians." *Arquitectura De Infraestructura / Infrastructure Architecture* 60 (2005): 11-19. Web.

¹⁵⁰ Lynch, K. (1984). *Good city form*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁵¹ Jensen, Ole B. "Flows of Meaning, Cultures of Movements – Urban Mobility as Meaningful Everyday Life Practice." *Mobilities* 4.1 (2009): 139-58. Print.

¹⁵² Marx 100

¹⁵³ Berlant, L. (2010). Cruel Optimism. In M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth (Authors), *The affect theory reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. p.101

¹⁵⁴ Cronan, T. (2012). The Aesthetic Politics of Affect nonsite.org. *Nonsite.org* RSS. Retrieved from <http://nonsite.org/review/radically-private-and-pretty-uncoded>

¹⁵⁵ Vrasti, Wanda (2009) How to Use Affective Competencies in Late Capitalism." British International Studies Association Conference (submitted essay). p. 3-9

expression, and even tries to define what one is allowed to feel for.”¹⁵⁶ The aesthetic, sensuous dimensions of everyday life are not apolitical, outside the ‘real’ world of markets and labor; they are not “bad for business” or the obverse of “pure cost”¹⁵⁷, but implicated and appropriated into these processes and systems with specific intentions of solidifying our “investment in capitalist structures”.¹⁵⁸ Thus, if one is inclined to take part in the “aesthetics of mobility” and the affective dimensions of everyday life, one should do so fully aware of the politics at stake. Jensen describes:

Having recognized the emotional forces at work, attempt to steer that energy toward emotional terrain that is more productive for effective resistance: a connection to place, courage in the face of calamity, a love for defending that which gives us life.¹⁵⁹



Ominous Detroit Freeway

With this in mind, we can return to the debates offered by Gilroy and Jensen about automobiles. Gilroy is correct in arguing that the automobile has been fetishized within Black material culture and that this fetishization obscures the automobile’s implication in systems of oppression. But Jensen’s description of the ‘aesthetics of mobility’ seems to have a quiet political thrust in its call to recognize how social agents re-envision alternative meanings, cultures, and identities. These re-envisioned alternative ways of being (together) in the world correspond with the call to re-orient the neoliberal sanctioned emotional terrain and present a way of thinking aesthetically about political practices. It further corresponds with the theoretical frameworks of this thesis project: fugitivity and the Black radical tradition and non-representational theory. As aforementioned, both frameworks emphasize the possibilities for life to exist beyond our normative boundaries and meanings and how life is about relationships and encounters, a radical being-togetherness that stands against neoliberal alterity and individualism. In fugitive movements lies the possibility for change, perhaps not total freedom

¹⁵⁶ Jensen, Tim. "Emotional Terrain of Neoliberalism." *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 8 (2011): n. pag. Web.

¹⁵⁷ Lynch, K. (1984). *Good city form*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁵⁸ Vradi, W. (2009) p. 3

¹⁵⁹ Jensen, T. (2011)

or the arrival of the ideal world, but the exposure that something more, something different and hopefully better—the wild, Maroon beyond—can exist in the “spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned”.¹⁶⁰

Hip-Hop Beyond Lyrics: Forays into the Beat

Paul Gilroy's opposition to how Black people have seemed to take consumerism in place of citizenship is not without critics. In fact, one particular critic, Adrienne Brown, pushes us into an engagement with hip-hop music beyond the superficial focus on lyrical meaning. Brown writes,

In his reading of the hip hop car, Gilroy pays a very literal and flat type of attention to lyrics that serve as the basis of his disappointment. Gilroy is not alone in this—he follows a long tradition of cultural critics that insist on reading hip hop strictly within the limited registers of the realist or the mimetic, an approach that has long coexisted with condemnations of the genre as assimilationist, violent, vapid, misogynist, homophobic, and apolitical. Hip-hop has long been held to a standard to which few other cultural imaginaries have had to aspire to be considered and closely read.¹⁶¹

Brown connects Gilroy's discussion of the automobile as representing the peak of the demise of the Black cultural imagination to other critiques of hip-hop that take the lyrical content as sociological reflections of the 'deviant' life of Blackness. Since the 1990s, hip-hop music has been a cultural scapegoat for the 'moral decay' of inner-city life in which the subversive, dark influence of the lyrics has contributed to the purported rise in black criminality, violence, and misogyny. As the post-industrial city decayed and disintegrated due to broader structural and political changes and public policy decisions, the residents were conflated with the space in which they lived. The assumed criminality of Blackness that underpins the drug war and massive incarceration levels of people-of-color are connected to the stereotypes corroborated through hip-hop music. Brown is right in noting that, like Blackness, hip-hop music at large is held to a higher standard than other cultural imaginaries that are permitted a larger degree of fantasy without bearing the burden of representing and being concerned with real life. This point goes back to a larger historical debate regarding cultural productions in which Black literature and art, too, have been treated as sociology within the mimetic tradition. Brown calls for cultural critics to explore hip-hop, and the black contemporary

¹⁶⁰ Halberstam (2013) 11

¹⁶¹ Brown, Adrienne. "Drive Slow: Rehearing Hip Hop Automotivity." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24.3 (2012): 265-75. Print.

cultural imaginary as a “space of fantastic seeing”. Further, to see hip-hop's engagement with the car as “[harboring] the specter of commonwealth and collective value.” In order to pursue this type of seeing and hearing, one would be required to:

decentralize lyrics as the primary way of engaging with hip hop aesthetics, and to think seriously about grain, tempo, emphasis, timbre, and meter in sound, as well as the visual statements in which hip hop has also so heavily invested...¹⁶²

With this in Mind

Within this theoretical framework composed of these various conversations, we can begin to turn to the empirics of this paper: my field work experience taking the bus, riding in cars, and/or walking every day in Detroit, MI, with a focus on the emotive, embodied dimensions of listening to music, riding in a car, and experiencing, or perhaps escaping, the post-industrial city.

The central idea is this: what Detroit is, or becomes, to the subjective embodied self can be altered, re-envisioned, in the process of moving through the city. As Jensen corroborates,

People not only observe the city whilst moving through it, rather they constitute the city by practicing mobility. The meaning of places in the city is constituted by the movement as much as by their morphological properties.¹⁶³

Moving through the city does not have to simply entail the passage from home to work to spaces of consumerism, as one drives through the market's conduit. Moving through the city can be seen as a type of free play, an interaction with the city and the human and non-human elements of the street with “a purposiveness without purpose” in which the street becomes unsettled and begins to tremor as new “emancipatory directions” open up.¹⁶⁴ Perhaps, the automobile's coveted place in Blackness is, in fact, surrender to consumerism, in which Black men, particularly, “are consciously re-incorporating themselves into [systems of exploitation] and conforming to contemporary

¹⁶² Brown, A. (2012)

¹⁶³ Jensen, O. (2009). Flows of Meaning, Cultures of Movements - Urban Mobility as Meaningful Everyday Life Practice. *Mobilities*, 4(1), 139-158.

¹⁶⁴ McKeon, O. (2011). Oh What a Mess/Aesthetics and Political Praxis- by Olive McKeon. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*. Retrieved from <http://www.joaap.org/issue8/mckeon.htm>

capitalism's relationship with an American consumerist ethos".¹⁶⁵ But to believe that this interpretation is the only possible interpretation is to allow the imagination to wither in acquiescence to the dominant opinion on hip-hop and Black men; a dominant opinion that continues to perversely justify their violent demise.

Critics of contemporary Black material culture seem to lament the demise of the visible political consciousness and organizations of the 1960s and 1970s, a consequence of ghettoization and neoliberal abandonment of urban space, the emergence of hip-hop music as a major cultural force, and the eventual integration of both into the "consumerist ethos" of American society. What is problematic about these critiques is that there seems to be a laser focus on the pathos of the Black urban poor. Matlon, for example, does not offer a critique of middle-and-upper-middle-class Black individuals who very likely equally participate in consumer society, nor of broader consumerist trends within America society, but instead paints a portrait of "hip-hop identities" as new "public fictions" that "affirm urban poor black men's masculinities" and "respond directly to feelings of inadequacy and dislocation that [they] feel in the neoliberal political economy".¹⁶⁶ An object- and subject-relationship to the means of production are material facts; this does not mean that the object or subject is bereft or incapable of a political critique, especially if we understand political practice as a form of play.

Fugitives

"I just feel like that's what I'm doing. I'm swerving around. Especially in the D-Town [Detroit] with whips [cars] everywhere in the city."

Big Sean

"Swerving through lanes, so I won't have to fuck with a cop"

SpaceGhostPurrp

As part of its integration into Blackness, the automobile transforms into a place of, and medium for, communal sociality, freedom rides, and fugitive transgressions that are not a surrender but a being-togetherness that swerves away from alienation.

¹⁶⁵ Matlon, J. (2010). Creating Public Fictions: The Black Man as Producer and Consumer. *The Black Scholar*, 40(3), 36-42.

¹⁶⁶ Matlon (2010) p. 36-39

In sum,

If it wasn't clear

The (possibly) dangerous implications of engaging moving objects, both former and current, are twofold: One risks further fetishizing the object and locating resistance where there is instead acquiescence to the consumerist void. One also risks foreclosing possibilities for understanding the political, of recognizing that there are moments when the post-industrial void can spring to life, when the denizens of that space, even while aware of their exploitation and consumer status, choose to see beyond it.

The Problematics of Representation:

What I feel is

Different

What I see is

The popular story wasn't about the caprices of capital, though; it was about the barbarism of blacks.¹⁶⁷

Status-quo representations of the ruins of Detroit can be implicitly used to pathologize Black people (opposite of market interests) and work toward the legitimization of market interests (whiteness). Going and thinking beyond representation, and recognizing human agency and transformation through movement, allows one to embrace the humanity and agency of Black people, and also think against market interests.

Over the past thirty years, Detroit has become popular among journalists and amateur photographers intrigued by the post-industrial ruins: mammoth-sized collapsed buildings with shattered windows, families living next door to burned homes reminiscent of the time after war. The oeuvres of these photographers, such as Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, are not monolithic, as differences in tone, filters and wash, and angles and context work to convey different impressions and responses from the viewers. Yet despite these deviations, these images are primarily focused on emptiness, ruin, and picturesque decay in an aestheticization of urban decline and deindustrialization. In these photographs, the landscape of Detroit becomes stillness, static and fixed, the opposite of how historical cultural geographer Richard Schein describes landscapes, writing,

¹⁶⁷ Solnit, R. (2007, July 1). Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the post-American landscape. *Harper's Magazine*.

Landscapes are always in the process of 'becoming,' no longer reified or concretized—inert and there—but continually under scrutiny, at once manipulable and manipulated, always subject to change, and everywhere implicated in the ongoing formulation of social life.¹⁶⁸

Instead, photographs of Detroit are more a reflection of W.J.T. Mitchell's insistence that landscapes serve a naturalizing function.¹⁶⁹ Mitchell explains how the normative readability of landscapes works to naturalize the sociopolitical and economic processes that construct them. As Richard Schein affirms, "The cultural landscape serves to naturalize or concretize—to make *normal*—social relations."¹⁷⁰ In this naturalization one can forget that collapsed within a single frame of a landscape is history, that the results of the events, circumstances, and choices of yesterday have simply been captured and frozen in time. When an idea of a landscape becomes naturalized, the possibilities of imagining that landscape become limited. The consequence of this naturalization is the sense of repetition one experiences when viewing images made of the city, as photographers follow prescribed routes and utilize standard conventions and narratives as they cover the standard dystopian tour in hopes of finding the most feral areas of the city. How does one react to this naturalization of ruins? Does one simply replace the images of decay with "good" images of the positive aspects of the city? This has been the market logic underpinning street cleanups, promotional images, and the creation of sanitized tourist bubbles in the city. It seems unsatisfactory, though, to simply replace one representation with another, and it seems *passé* to simply "deconstruct" or render visible the constructed nature of, and social relations buried beneath, a particular representation. Further unsatisfactory is the binary of good and bad representation as neither captures the sensible 'animic flux' of everyday life and thus remains incomplete.

¹⁶⁸ Schein, Richard H. "The Place of Landscape: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting an American Scene." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87.4 (1997): 660-80. Print.

¹⁶⁹ Mitchell, W.J.T. 1994a. Introduction. In *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, 1-4. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

¹⁷⁰ Schein, Richard H. Normative Dimensions of Landscape. p. 203 (2007). In *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J.B. Jackson*, ed. Chris Wilson and Paul Groth, 199-218. Berkeley: University of California Press.

With such, my field experiences of moving throughout the city can be seen, instead, as acts of witnessing and “dwelling-in-motion”¹⁷¹ in which I attended to what Dewsberry describes as the “parts of the world full of occurrences that have little tangible presence in that they are not immediately shared and therefore having to be re-presented to be communicated”.¹⁷² Dewsberry, as well as Nigel Thrift, has done much in the way of theorizing new ways of gaining and representing knowledge about the world, particularly in the social sciences, as part of the broad framework of non-representational theory. Dewsberry calls for researchers to no longer separate the world into “meaningful representations” and “ephemeral feelings” and instead to acknowledge how both ‘fold into the fabric of the world’ A non- (or more than) representational approach involves looking at things in an ‘unusual’ way, and taking the body as not separate from the world. As Dewsberry writes, “witnessing moves thought by permanently unfixing and altering the perspective, denying any one figuration or representation of the way the world is.” Methodologically, non-representational theory calls for “experimental practices” that can potentially “amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers”.¹⁷³ In representing what one witnesses, one should do so with “a certain fidelity to what [one] describes”¹⁷⁴

Experiences of listening to music while driving around the city correspond well with a more-than-representational approach. Lawrence Grossberg notes that music “has a unique and striking relationship to the human body, surrounding, and enfolding, and even invading it with its own rhythm and textures”.¹⁷⁵ Music moves between the body and mind, and through one’s passage in the car one moves between the elements of the streets creating an assemblage, a co-mingling of these various components. As Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle suggest, a focus on music offers “a way to both abstract and particularize affect states [as well as] furnishing a reflective medium for imagining

¹⁷¹ Urry, J. (2007). *Mobilities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

¹⁷² Dewsberry, J. (2003). Witnessing space: 'knowledge without contemplation' *Environment and Planning A*, 35(11), 1907-1932.

¹⁷³ Whatmore (2004) 1362 in Dewsberry 2003

¹⁷⁴ Latham (2003) 1903 in Dewsberry 2003

¹⁷⁵ Grossberg, L. (1992). *We gotta get out of this place: Popular conservatism and postmodern culture*. p.152 New York: Routledge.

affect ‘itself’”.¹⁷⁶ Admittedly, because musical experience is so of the body and mind, it may be hard to make fully tangible in words its depth of experience as they exist in our minds.

Below, I present brief narratives that weave together memories from my fieldwork experiences. I use *italics* to indicate internal thoughts and reflections of the describing narrator. The changes in tense (from past to present) happened unconsciously in the process of writing, perhaps as a result of shifts from when I am remembering to when I am describing.

**Seeing
More,
At the Bus Stop**

It’s early morning, and I’m standing at the bus stop. This is not a bus stop with a bench or a shelter, but a simply a sign in the grass in front a major street that mirrors a highway. The speed limit must be 45 mph, or so. Commuters fly down the street in a continuous passing that ceases during red lights to allow a momentary calm to pass. The wavering stillness of idling quickly resumes to full movement. The cars make me keenly aware of my immobility and reliance on the coming public bus. *Standing so near the street feels vulnerable, to be a body in a sea of flying objects.* Even with headphones on, I could still hear a quiet mechanic rumble of traffic, in which beeps, honks, metal squeals, exhaust, birds, and engines scrambled together in grey noise. *The grey noise makes the moments of calm even more potent and unexpected, almost heavy, as if one couldn’t exhale until the traffic returned.*

The street that the bus stop is on is at the top of a gradual hill, and standing there, one can look down into the valley. First, there is the street, an island, and another street, before one reaches the businesses that sit on the perimeters of the residential neighborhood tucked behind them. By businesses I mean gas stations, car repair shops, a liquor store, tattoo parlor, and hair salon in various states of success. There are no tall buildings in the area, and the trees that are spread throughout rise above roofs.

It seems impossible to look away from the traffic, as if it were out of sight, for even one second, it would do something unexpected, as if your sight controlled it, and it is reliant on your watching presence. It is comforting to imagine that the relationship between you and the street is more than arbitrary. The homeostasis of the flow of the traffic is dependent on you staying at the bus stop, if you step forward or threw an object, that homeostasis would be disrupted, every body and object in your field of vision affected, like a lake hit by a pebble.

I step out of my thoughts and return to the street. The way the trees rise above the buildings and homes exposes the built-ness of the landscape, that the urban was inserted into nature, built around and between it like an afterthought. The looming billboards and electric poles feel random and awkward.

¹⁷⁶ Thompson, M., & Biddle, I. D. p. 60 (2013). *Sound, music, affect: Theorizing sonic experience*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

As it gets closer to the bus's scheduled arrival time, other passengers join me at the bus stop; an invisible force field prevent us from standing less than two feet from each other. Headphones convey that there is no need, or perhaps, desire for a verbal greeting, just glances and nods, and shifts in position as we calibrate to each other's presence. The bus is in the distance. Unlike the regular passengers with bus passes, I have two singles in my hand that I'm hoping aren't too wrinkled. The bus driver sees us and pulls over to stop. We get on and begin looking for a seat; it's early and the other passengers seem to be either caffeinated or jaded, or maybe just habituated to the process, uninterested in the college student home for the summer who has to ask how much bus fare is. I sit down, wishing I could zone out but knowing that my stop is in a couple of miles.

In this passage there is a privileging of consciousness and the viscosity of the experience over the music coming out of the headphones. The passage also provides some reflection on how different bodies, humans and non-humans with affective capacities, acted upon each other and how the flow and ecology of these assemblages was routine but precarious, vulnerable to disruption by the insertion or removal of a presence. The scale of the narrative goes back and forth, stretching from down into the valley, up into the trees, then back to the money in my hand.

Accepting the Flux:

Blackness. Although the word connotes specificity, specific experiences and specific histories of *being*, the word remains unruly and ambiguous, able to encapsulate, to absorb like a Black Hole that pulls any and all matter inside and refuses to release it—perhaps that started with the one drop rule. The word may sit still on the page on which it is written—Blackness—but, if you look closely, it is a word, a way of being, that is always in flux, that slightly shimmers in the light, movement, a constant state of transformation in tradition.

Jordan Davis. Renisha McBride. Jonathan Ferrell. Oscar Grant.¹⁷⁷

These are but a few of the names of human beings, born and raised in the United States of America, of African descent, male and female, young, teenagers and twenty-somethings, parents, fiancés, sisters, brothers, friends whose lives were arrested and annihilated without warrant, tried without leniency, sentenced to death without a jury's sanction. All were in a state of movement, of transporting through automobiles and public trains, and were killed, condemned to a state of infinite

¹⁷⁷ Jordan Davis was shot dead November 2012. Renisha McBride was shot dead November 2013. Jonathan Ferrell was shot dead September 2013. Oscar Grant was shot dead New Years Day 2009.

immobility because they were perceived to be threats. These names are but placards for complex lives. Read them, reflect upon them, cry and yell, allow yourself to care, to feel, if you must, as I have in order to allow them to change and shape the philosophy, the ideas, which give foundation to this chapter. One cannot speak of fugitivity without captivity, transformation without deterioration, life without death. To speak of one, and not the other, is to silence crucial aspects of the human condition, to silence crucial experiences of being within Blackness, to silence even Blackness itself, which is always oscillating, spiraling, between life and death, between beauty and the brute, at least within this tumultuous historical context in which we have come to know it. Blackness is the calm of togetherness before the lynch mob arrives, the card game before the police mob descended upon the ghetto, slamming bodies onto cars, dice left unrolled, it is the proud smiling mother naming her daughter Keisha before realizing how the world will denigrate and desecrate that name, it is Jamal's teeming exuberance before it gets him suspended from class from school from life, it is looking in mirrors proudly at full lips, wide eyes, sweltering bottoms before they are made scandalous and sexualized. It is the Black body, the Black being, before it is mediated by the world, before the world lacerates its meaning upon skin, before Fanon was sent radiating into object-hood by the pointing finger of a young boy, before Spillers laid crushed by the weight of false names heaving down upon her spirit.

Is unmediated Blackness possible to know? That is, can one attempt to know or understand Blackness without relying upon the meanings of the world—the world being what one would call 'civil society' or 'mainstream America'? The thought exercise within this chapter has been to think beyond and beneath what has come to be known as Blackness. There are countless conversations about the ruins of Detroit, countless conversations about the banality, violence, and sexism of hip-hop. As David Marriott writes in his short, yet analytically rich, text "On Black Men"

Black men tend to be unseen except as threats. They are mostly poor and invisible, humanly invisible to many whites who see a type entirely alien and extraneous to them, a generic emblem at best, undesirable and dangerous. This nullification gives birth to a dependable solitude, a learning to be unseen, unloved.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Marriott, D. S. *On Black Men*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000. Print. (38)

I often think about how, since becoming relatively ‘conscious’, I can no longer be angry with Black people. I love them too much. To be angry is to abide by respectability politics, to judge Black people just as others have judged them, to express disapproval and rejection. The world teaches us middle and upper class Blacks to be angry or to laugh at Blackness. One is quick to listen to a rap song and denounce the lyrics and the world vision that it expresses as dumb, superficial, a reflection of the demise of Black culture and Black men, particularly. Yet, Aime Ellis reminds us, in some cases the only time that some Black males feel alive, and feel recognized is when they are fulfilling the role of the threat, of making racist dreams come true and embodying the stereotypes that have shaped their existence since before they were even born.¹⁷⁹ I often think about how, even as a Black American man, the subjectivities and consciousness of some rap artists are undecipherable, I can only understand so much. So I can’t imagine how impenetrable and hieroglyphic rap lyrics and the expressed subjectivities of rappers must be to other people who do not study and reflect on Black culture and history as a job. Blackness is, in many ways, unknowable, unrecognizable outside of dominant understandings. To begin to learn to recognize the humanity of Black people, to see Blackness beyond criminality, to see the spaces of Blackness (Detroit, Syracuse, Gary) beyond ruins and decay requires deep reflection and opening one’s body to feelings and empathy, to begin to chip away at the layers and layers and layers of stereotypes that have come to define Black existence, to attempt to enact a mode of human existence that is beyond estrangement and alienation, beyond fear of the Other, beyond hatred and insecurity, to slowly crawl towards love, to awaken to what connects us, to shake and breathe again, to ride through the city, through the conduits of Blackness, not with trepidation, nor with judgment, to look pass the burning buildings, to rub broken cement on bare skin and sleep with the street like graffiti. Look up to see through eyes squinting from the sunlight of life the lives that live inside, between, and beneath the cracks; it is to revel in the interstices between dreams and nightmares.

A Re-Memory Of Moving Through the City

with High School Students

Even though my summer internship director told me that I needed to show up to work an hour early that Thursday, I, of course, *left* my house at the time I was supposed to be arriving. I was just getting off of my first bus when she called, asking where I was. We were taking the high school

¹⁷⁹ Ellis, Aimé J. *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 2011. Print.

students to one of the largest parks in Detroit, River Rouge Park, to clean up and tour an urban farm, and the transportation was waiting for me. Instead of catching the second bus, she told me to wait and that they would swing by to pick me up before continuing on to the park. So I sat on a bench outside a gas station, facing the street. I didn't know what type of van or bus to expect so I watched traffic and waited for her to call me when they were getting close. I knew the students were going to 'clown' me for being late. All of the students were from Detroit and ranged from 15 to 17 years old, a mix of rising sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Every Monday-Thursday for about six weeks we worked with the students in a mix of leadership activities and community service, and even a healthy cooking class in which we aimed to instill a commitment to nutrition and sustainability on a budget. I enjoyed working with the students. Even though they would sometimes complain about the community service projects, and I would curiously have to do most of the work, I understood how 'real' their lives were. Many of the students would come to programming without having eaten and with no lunch. The guys in the group would tell me stories about dealing with police or school security, and many struggled with grade-appropriate writing and speaking skills. My director was not much older than I, probably in her late mid-twenties, and had certainly 'hardened' up to working with a group of outspoken teenagers from Detroit. I respected her, though, despite our disagreements about how safe Detroit is. She spent too much time following crime blogs. Soon, I saw a fifteen-passenger van at the stoplight and my phone began to ring. They pulled over on the side of the street and I climbed in. I tried to ignore how potentially suspect the situation would seem to the outside observer. The students were ready with an onslaught of jokes, which I had to humbly concede to: I was, in fact, late. The ride to the park was decent. I must admit that my students weren't perfect. Some of them were passing around a water bottle that I was slightly suspicious was not filled with water, others were rapping along to the songs on the radio, curse words and all. Some of the girls in the group had piercings and tattoos that made my single, unused, ear piercing seem all the more conservative. But, of course, all of these factors are superficial, for the students were riding to go clean up a park, when they very well could have been at home. We arrived at the park, and passed out trash bags and gloves and proceeded to break into groups to begin cleaning up. The van would be back in several hours, making it painfully clear that we had nothing but the task ahead of us to look forward to. There was also a scavenger hunt going on to help the students learn more about plant and animal life.

The sun was high in the sky as the students and I trudged throughout the sprawling park. It was quite sad to see the large amounts of litter. One of the worst incidents was trashcans full of old school lunches that had been emptied everywhere. The trash wasn't initially bagged. My internship director was convinced that a gang, or at least a group of troublemakers, had purposefully thrown the trash. I had a hard time fathoming someone doing consciously something so destructive, but I didn't remember it being windy recently. Although the students helped to clean up the trash, I felt oddly bad about making them responsible for cleaning up someone else's mess. Even though I knew it would be beneficial to the park and local residents, the students sometimes felt like they were being punished. Something about their positions in the world prevented inner-city community service from feeling altruistic or 'good' in the way that it does for people who don't actually live in the inner city. One day, even, one of my male students, a popular but rowdy junior who would show up late and leave early, remarked "I ain't sign no contract" in reference to him really having no formal obligation to do the work. Even though he didn't realize it, his comment made me think about the long history of Black contractual labor, going all the back to the Reconstruction era in which Black people were in many ways re-enslaved through unfair labor contracts and as punitive measures. Contracts continue to put Blacks at a disadvantage through unfair housing and financial policies with exorbitant interest rates, or indebting them to sports and entertainment teams to do the bidding of corporations. "I ain't sign no contract" reverberated across time and space for me, showing how the elusiveness of freedom and the re-fashioning of captivity manifest in Black thoughts.

Walking through the park, hands gloved and trash bags dragging along the ground, provided a great opportunity to listen to the students: to hear their thoughts, experiences, and questions. Sometimes their stories could be difficult to hear. Arthur¹⁸⁰ was one of my bright students who enjoyed the activities we did all summer but has a learning disability. I didn't like to make too many assumptions about my students' lives, but I picked up certain impressions about Arthur's life at home. His older brother would come barreling down the street in a low rider blasting music to come pick him up, contrasting with Arthur's quiet demeanor. Arthur confided about walking home and being accosted

¹⁸⁰ Name retracted

by the police who searched his belongings and physically roughed him up because someone was “shooting off fireworks”. I was upset that happened in the first place, and it was further problematic because of Arthur’s disability, which can make him naïve and vulnerable. He also told stories about being suspended from school, and put unknowingly into a special ed. class. All of the factors that push Black males towards dropping out of school seem to be compounding on Arthur, and as a summer intern I could not offer much beyond just listening and sharing as much advice as possible.

Swerving Away: Concluding Comments

This chapter has reflected on the ethical and political dimensions of mobility by considering how the automobile has been foundational to Detroit’s development and eventual, gradual, demise. This chapter has discussed how the automobile is a vehicle for spatial, social, cultural, and economic mobility—that is not necessarily upward—for it has been foundational to oppression, economic stagnation, and spatial segregation. Explicating the divergent phenomena that are connected to the automobile, a technology of movement, has worked to illuminate some of the paradoxes of travel when considered within the context of Black social life. This chapter has also brought together different theoretical conversations: afro-pessimism, non-representational theory and affect, and cultural studies. The problems in seeing and understanding Blackness, Detroit, and automobility beyond stereotypes and dominant perspectives have been a central theme. I have questioned whether it is possible to understand what I see as aspects of Black social life—riding around the city, being and dwelling in the city—in ways that go beyond Black criminality and denigration. Afro-pessimism has worked to keep the chapter grounded in the material realities and historical continuities that surround the problematics of this chapter, yet non-representational theory provides us with a different capacity, a capacity to think and see new possibilities. In writing the chapter I have sought to impact the reader’s affective registers¹⁸¹ to think of Detroit and automobility in complex and empathetic ways, to acknowledge material realities as well as how individual lives still

¹⁸¹ As Simon O’Sullivan has written in “The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation”

“This is art’s function: to switch our intensive register, to reconnect us with the world. Art opens us up to the non-human universe that we are part of [...] Through careful maneuvers the molecular is opened up, the aesthetic is activated, and art does what is its chief *modus operandi*: it transforms, if only for a moment, our sense of our ourselves and our notion[s] of our world.”

That non-human universe does not have to be composed of animals and plants, however, but also the materialities that surround us, that become endowed with life, and have played a central role in the makings of our lives.

unfold within. To see how, as the early epigraph from Jared Sexton states, there is life within death, a constant attempt to swerve away no matter how nearby the police force edges. What does one take from this? I stated in the introduction to this thesis that I was willing to embrace a critical ambivalence, yet in a truly ambivalent moment—at an oscillating road with fissures—I find myself wanting a clear answer, a way of discerning in what direction I should turn. Non-representation theory, however, absconds from relying on a single set of principles or criteria to evaluate a reality that is always becoming and in-process but instead works toward an ethical ethos that embraces encounters that open one to a ‘generous sensibility’, that might awaken or reaffirm one’s affective engagements with others and cultivate an appreciation not only for what is, the brute facts of existence, but our creative capacity to envision and create what might be possible.

Conclusion: Black Effugium

Prefatory Remarks at the Departure Gates

There was James Baldwin, Vincent Carter, and Richard Wright. There was Albert Camus. There was Anton de Kom, Heather Neff, Abel and Sophia, and Youth. There were the volunteers in Ghana. There was Detroit and its residents. There were Black migrants and runaway slaves. There was the Afro-Pessimists, Frank Wilderson III, Jared Sexton, Saidiya Hartman, and the French anti-capitalist Loic Wacquant. There was Fred Moten. If you read closely, Frantz Fanon is between the lines. There was Blackness. There is anti-Blackness.

I was there, too, out in the world.

Now, I am here—

Detroit, at the moment.

These characters are connected not only by virtue of their inhabitation within this thesis project, but because of their inhabitation in Blackness, their being of and engagement with Blackness, or rather their being against anti-Blackness, their constant attempts to push against its limits and redefine its contours, make it less deadly or at least loosen its grasp. These characters are all wanderers, moving around the world attempting to make sense of things.

Then there is this project and I.

Sometimes it may seem that I am an intellectual wanderer,

A Deleuzian Nomad.

Such texts are traversed by a movement that comes from without, that does not begin on the page (nor the preceding pages), that is not bounded by the frame of the book; it is entirely different from the imaginary movement of representation or the abstract movement of concepts that habitually take place among words and within the mind of the reader.

—Gilles Deleuze “Nomad Thought”

Many of the themes that I have explored within this thesis project have been central to my academic and personal work and thought for several years. I have maintained an interest in the existential

quest for self-understanding, authenticity, and individuality (if such things are even possible) for Black subjects that are plagued by stereotypes, and in what I see as a Ralph Ellison 'awakening' to consciousness and to one's, arguably, unique, but yet collectively, historically imbedded, subjectivity. Further, I have been interested in contemporary introspective Black male intellectuals. I do not necessarily mean W.E.B Dubois or Frederick Douglass, for instance, but mid-20th century writers like Baldwin or Wright, Jean Toomer, and then 21st century native sons like Kiese Laymon, rappers like Childish Gambino and Kid Cudi, and, of course, myself in many ways. The writers in this loosely defined group are individualist, largely secular, reflective, and often brooding. These writers all convey a sense of being outside of dominant ideas of Blackness, of taking on the relatively quiet political action of the written word, and seeking new ways to define what it means to be Black, a man, and a human being. Out of their personal angst comes renewed insights, and out of their curiosity and ambition comes the desire to explore new ideas or synthesize previously disconnected ones and to venture outside of typical cultural boundaries.

Inter-disciplinary work is default for me, so it has been amazing and challenging to produce a project that not only experimented with different ways of writing and of knowing (the epistemologies of e.g. Black studies, social and political theory, history), with different geopolitical contexts (a formerly colonized African state, a post-industrial city, and a 'post'-colonial neighborhood), and the different subject positions (e.g. the migrant, the tourist, the 'local') which occupy them.

Thesis Summary:

A Condensation Of Diverse Elements

In this thesis project I have intertwined a material foundation with philosophical and literary inquiries. This is to not rely on a simple dichotomy of material as ‘real’ objects and immaterial as the abstract or “unreal” but to consider how material objects, such as the body, are no more real than immaterial phenomena such as emotions, moods, and affects.¹⁸² I locate and critique very material realities such as anti-Black racism, neo-liberalism and global capitalism, and the lingering detritus of colonialism and enslavement, before considering how these materialities affect and circulate around individual existences.

Methodologically, I have drawn from a select and diverse repertoire of primary and secondary sources. I uniquely develop the theoretical framework of fugitivity throughout the thesis from the springboard provided by Fred Moten (via Nathaniel Mackey), Gilles Deleuze (via George Jackson), and the critiques of it from Afro-Pessimism—all of which are grounded on and in the lived history/presence of Blackness.

This project was originally conceptualized under a normative liberal, cosmopolitan, ideal: that through travel and empathy that crossed national and ethnic boundaries could one arrive at an egalitarian humanist vision of “human connections”. Beneath this ideal was a literary interest in how the process of travel aided Black writers in acquiring self-understanding and understanding of the Other. Last, I wanted to understand how my experiences traveling might compare to the 20th century.

I arrived in Europe with James Baldwin, Vincent Carter, and Richard Wright. I encountered the neurosis and alienation and slight melancholy of these then middle-aged Black writers weary from the absurdity of the realities of the racism and estrangement that it seemed they could not escape. I considered James Baldwin’s conception of the American, white or Black, as peculiar among Western people and his critique how the categorization of human beings perpetuates estrangement and

¹⁸² Latham, Alan, and Derek P. McCormack. "Moving Cities: Rethinking the Materialities of Urban Geographies." *Progress in Human Geography* 28.6 (2004): 701-24. Print.

alienation. With Vincent Carter I closely analyzed his existential trajectory in Bern, Switzerland as he progressed toward an acceptance of the absurdity of the world in Black. Working with Richard Wright's *Pagan Spain* I considered the complexities of understanding and writing about a "foreign" context.

I traveled to Amsterdam to dually engage the experiences of African-American tourists and Dutch Caribbean migrants.

The meditation on my time volunteering in Kasoa, Ghana which was wrought with disillusionment and frustration that was only episodically relieved with Rastas and reflections.

Swerving in Detroit was a seemingly good idea until Jordan Davis and Renisha McBride were killed and awoke me from my dream.

The methodological dilemma in doing a project interested in Blackness *globally* is that it becomes difficult to discern which experiences to include and which experiences can I ethically ignore. Would it have been possible to do Amsterdam by purely focusing on the travels of Black Americans? Was there a way I could have discussed the nuances of my time in Ghana without acknowledging the specter of colonialism?

Frank Wilderson III argues that a conceptual failing of scholars working in Black studies is that "people consciously or unconsciously peel away from the strength and the terror of their evidence in order to propose some kind of coherent, hopeful solution to things."¹⁸³ Seeking to avoid such a misleading pitfall I sought to construct narratives that embraced, as aforementioned, fugitivity and captivity, life and death. The result of this, however, is constant ambivalence, a constant running between "look! We can escape" and "Alas, here, too, is violence". At one point in my thinking I considered framing this project as an illustration that anti-Black racism is a global phenomenon. Yet, is that not a *passé* point for we, the relatively conscious, know that racism, anti-Black racism, exists

¹⁸³ "The Position of Unthought: An Interview with Saidiya V. Hartman" *Qui Parle* 13 no. 2 (2003): 183-201, 183.

from Israel to Brazil, in Norway, and India as a condition of colonialism, white supremacy, and US cultural hegemony.

As the work of countless scholars and activists—from Olaudah Equiano to Assata Shakur—corroborates: modern, global Blackness has been shaped by three fundamental historical events: enslavement, colonization, and apartheid.

Through the processes of enslavement, colonization, and apartheid, the Black or African *self* was alienated from itself and its familial origins (natal-alienation). The Black self, now estranged from him or her self, is relegated to *objecthood*. Not only is the self no longer recognized by the Other; the self no longer recognizes itself beyond the stereotypes that the dominant Other has created.

Enslavement, colonization, and apartheid also led to Black dispossession and dislocation, a loss of and estrangement from a sense of home.

Finally, there is physical and mental degradation: enslavement, colonization, and apartheid subjects the Black or African human being not only to ignominy, debasement of material and cultural value, and nameless suffering but also pushed him or her into a zone of nonbeing or social death characterized by a denial of dignity, mental and emotional damage, and exile.

These three historical events: enslavement, colonization, and apartheid underpin the necessity for Black subjects to understand and hold autonomy over their selves and their destinies, their place and modes of being (somewhere) in the world.

The processes of travel, of fugitivity, are not just about making it to the place outside captivity: they are, also, about healing.

On Fugitive Dreams

At the end of her text, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Hartman recounts a collective story of intra-African fugitivity during the height of the slave trade as told by the elders of Gwolu whom she visits with her group. Below are select excerpts from Hartman's many striking passages in which she translated the Gwolu's orality into written word.¹⁸⁴

To remember what they had lost and what they became, what had been torn apart and what had come together, the fugitives and refuges and multitudes in flight were called the Sisala, which means "to come together, to become together, to weave together." (225)

Knowing that you don't ever regain what you've lost, they embraced becoming something other than who they had been and naming themselves again. (225)

And dreams of what might be possible were enshrined in the names of these towns and villages founded by fugitives: *safe at last, we have come together, here where no one can reach us anymore...* Like communities of maroons and fugitives and outliers elsewhere, their identity was defined as much by what they were running from as by what they were running towards. (225)

Flight was the language of freedom. (222)

Sisala: to become together, to weave together, is a beautiful word for a lived experience that is deeply human, deeply devastating, yet not wholly emotionally annihilating, for it is a word that encapsulates how fugitives reinvented themselves out of fragments, people from different backgrounds, languages and experiences came together to create something that did not previously exist, it is a word that reflects the universe we are resting in, in which particles exploded out of nothingness to become, making the possibility for existence.

In this thesis project I have tried to work in the tradition of the Sisala, as I weaved together stories and experiences that exist in the same world, but seemingly separately, to envision what new ideas and perspectives might be produced or inspired out of their togetherness. Pan-Africanism gave me a

¹⁸⁴ Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. Print.

conceptual lens that displayed the necessity of and legitimacy for imagining these stories together and reflecting on how they are linked, sometimes subtly other times conspicuously, materially and immaterially.

It is the contemporary that seemingly presents the most conceptual difficulties for envisioning fugitivity. Even in terms of literal geography and landscape, the world is a crowded and surveyed place in which it is difficult to escape US cultural hegemony. Further, one must remember, metaphorically, that restless fugitives seeking to escape the suburbs only gentrify urban neighborhoods, making it seem that the hubris of Columbus is inevitable for there does not exist anything physical that has yet to be discovered and occupied. This is why we must work on ideological, emotional, and creative terrains where discovery, escape, and evasion of the State remain possible.

Fugitivity is a sacrifice, yet one that many are willing to take as a way of becoming-toward-freedom. When Youth from *Passing Strange* speaks to his Mother on the phone from Europe he tells her that he does not plan on coming back home: "Why leave a place where I can be myself to come back to a place where I can't?" She responds, "Why do you need a particular place to be yourself? Can't you be yourself at home?" This is an important question, for it provokes thought on why dislocation, on why departure is necessary for self-discovery and expression. Of course, it is partly because Youth is young and idealistic and can't focus on the depth of his Mother's questions as he is focused on an upcoming concert. Time progresses, however. A maturing Youth realizes that the "real" he has been looking for doesn't truly exist, that the closest thing is art. Soon, Youth is on a plane back to Los Angeles for his Mother's funeral, wishing his Mother could have waited to die until he got back to America, remarking

Last night I woke up in darkness. And I didn't know where I was. So, I just sat there...asking her questions...all night long...like how can I go on...when the love that kept me aloft is gone?

This brings Hartman's title full circle, as Youth has *lost his mother* and is forced to accept that what has been lost cannot be regained. Further, Hartman, walking along the slave route, must deal with

her own loss, the loss due to natal alienation of a lack of familial origins and the loss of histories, of stories, and voices that we will never be able to hear, as she writes,

I must admit I was disappointed not to have found any stories or songs or tales about the millions who had been unable to experience flight, evade terror, and taste victory... Theirs was an impossible chronicle, which no one had been willing or able to tell. (231)

James Baldwin similarly grappled with the unknown, silenced ghosts of enslavement, the bodies and lives that we only know existed, two years after his travels in Africa when he introspectively reflected on a moment in Dakar, in a slave castle, in the 1964 essay, "The White Problem". In sharing a "small anecdote" Baldwin recounts how he and his sister went to an island to visit the Slave House, which looked "a little like houses you see in New Orleans". Baldwin describes how "I could still smell it. What it must have smelled like, with all those human beings chained together, in such a place." He continues with a particularly devastatingly beautiful passage of remembrance:

You go to the edge of the door, and look down, and at your feet are some black stones and the foam of the Atlantic Ocean, bubbling up against you. The day that we were there, I tried, but it was impossible—the ocean is simply as vast as the horizon—I tried to imagine what it must have felt like to find yourself chained and speechless, speechless in the most total sense of that word, on your way *where?*¹⁸⁵

To be speechless, for a man who professed that words are often all we have amidst the brutality of the world, to be speechless, for a man who absorbed the world to only spit it back in words and passages with clarity, to be speechless, for a man who described the Black experience as unspeakable, is to convey the most profound. In this moment, the nearly clichéd account of return passages to slave castles on West African coasts becomes renewed and re-membered: the bubbling odious ocean, the horizon, the unknown place where one would be shipped, the unknown of whether one would live or die, seems to be unfathomable for the contemporary subject, looking down into the ocean with the security of knowing that the slave house is closed for business. All that remains is grappling with its ghosts. As Arun Saldanha notes:

... A body engages in interactions with circumstantial forces and things that mingle with a body's very being as it moves around, making it different than before. [...]

¹⁸⁵ "The White Problem" in Baldwin, James, and Randall Kenan. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York: Pantheon, 2010. Print.

This conception of embodiment is intrinsically geographical, as it requires tracing a body's encounters with objects, conditions, and other bodies, which are possible only in particular places.¹⁸⁶

Baldwin's passage also brings us to this thesis's second theoretical framework, non-representational theory, which forwards that what matters in the real or material world is the myriad interactions between human and nonhuman bodies, we can begin by considering the various forces that are acting on Baldwin. Standing at door at the Slave House, the memories of enslavement are affecting Baldwin, the residual presences of the enslaved impacts his consciousness and his understanding of realities in that moment, as well as the heat, the ocean spray, the sounds that surround him, and the people he is traveling with.

¹⁸⁶ Saldanha, Arun. "Skin, Affect, Aggregation: Guattarian Variations on Fanon." *Environment and Planning A* 42.10 (2010): 2414. Print.

Limitations of the Study
or a stream of consciousness partially inspired

Can life—movement complexities nuance breath whisper glance rain felt intangible incommunicable known experienced moment—be fully translated into words? I think not and this is why the writing of Blackness is so hard why orality is so enticing why music and image makes so much more *sense*. I feel therefore I am. Can I replicate touch through texture? Sight through noun? The original movement that became my inspiration was felt, embodied, it existed within I.

I, as a writer, am less concerned with my intent in writing and more concerned with my writing's reception, its transmission of meanings and images into you. But I must specify what I mean. With film, the director controls the images the viewer sees we only see what lies in the frame. With writing I am reliant on trust that the man or woman who has only lived in the desert can imagine the ocean that the person who has never seen Ghana or Amsterdam can imagine place. As I writer I have forsaken the burden of explanation for expression. I may lean far left and I believe all writing is didactic but I also believe in poetics, reservation, and subtlety.

I didn't know, at first, how to write about *Passing Strange* or hip-hop in Detroit because the power of those phenomena rested, for me, in sound and vibrato, bass and lyric. So I crafted narratives around those sounds, narratives that attempted to connect those sounds to the broader world in which they exist, from which they were imagined and voiced. Those sounds have power because they can connect, they can resonant—it is not just the music of *Passing Strange* but the ability of that music to lyrically encapsulate the desire for freedom, of feeling misunderstood, a desire and feeling that are not disconnected from the history of enslavement, a desire and feeling that still resonates in the hearts of people who are born into the world and forced to hurriedly understand the history of its making if they wish to understand the conditions of their arrival. Thinking about hip-hop music hits me square in the chest because I understand what it does, the power it holds, for people who, in many ways, have little power. Hip-hop may seem dark, at times, violent and impolite yet there are real experiences underpinning those words that give the music its power. If I truly believe in the words of Baldwin (and so many others), I have to be willing to face the brute, human realities of existence, of existence in Blackness, if I truly wish to understand what is happening and what happened.

I want to say that a limitation of the study is connected to the limitations of words—but that feels too evasive. The limitations are the gaps and remaining questions; the words and experiences not yet written that remain at the gate and are waiting to fly.

On Future Work

We appeal to the future we imagine. We imagine what we are. Blackness as appeal, as escape. We are always also walking in another world. My archive is a dehiscence at the heart of the archive and on its edge—a disorder, an appeal.

Fred Moten “Black Optimism”

One can only hope that his or her scholarly pursuits can educate others and inspire future projects. Such future projects can include work that centers Blackness within various schools of theory, whether it is work in affect and emotion, cultural geography, existentialism, or the critical anti-capitalist work coming out of Europe from writers such as Franco “Bifo” Berardi, or the current renewed interest in Giles Deleuze. Such a centering of Blackness aside theory is reflected in the works of Fred Moten and Frank Wilderson III, both of whom inspire my thinking, despite their disagreements with each other. Layered beneath this project is the question of whether we, in the tumultuous contemporary, can still believe in the possibility for freedom and escape. The figure of ‘fugitivity’ comes out of a strain of theory loosely known as “Black optimism,” and the opposite of that is “Afro-pessimism,” which is grounded on how the persistence of anti-Black racism necessitates that *that* reality—anti-*Black* racism specifically—be the unwavering foundation of any social or political theoretical engagement with the world, for it, arguably, precedes other forms of oppression.

This project does not stake a claim in one single camp but instead seeks to escape the camp by working in the tradition of James Baldwin: critical ambivalence. Ambivalence leaves room for possibilities. Ambivalence leaves room for love in misery, for transcendence in captivity. Ambivalence leaves room for one to be and think more than the world. One can only hope that others pursue work that is unafraid to be unsure, unafraid to reveal in an ontology with gaps, to use contradictory sources and ideas, to draw atypical connections, to acknowledge that one’s body exists and can *feel*, to step outside disciplinary boundaries, and to bring the archive to the field. In the words of one of my former professors, perhaps it is an “incoherent theory,” but what is more incoherent (brilliant) than the Black radical tradition: an escape that goes *nowhere*?

Works Cited and Referenced

Achebe, Chinua. *Home and Exile*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 92-93. Print.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Allen, Amy. "Power, Subjectivity, and Agency: Between Arendt and Foucault." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10.2 (2002): 131-49. Print.

Ascher, François. "Multi-mobility, Multispeed Cities: A Challenge for Architects, Town Planners and Politicians." *Arquitectura De Infraestructura / Infrastructure Architecture* 60 (2005): 11-19. Web.

Bakhtin, M. M., and Michael Holquist. "Response to a Question from Novy Mir." *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: U of Texas, 1986. 7. Print.

Baldwin, James, and Randall Kenan. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York: Pantheon, 2010. Print.

Baldwin, James. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985. Print.

Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimism." *The Affect Theory Reader*. By Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010. N. pag. Print.

Brown, Adrienne. "Drive Slow: Rehearing Hip Hop Automotivity." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24.3 (2012): 265-75. Print.

Camus, Albert. *Albert Camus, the Essential Writings*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1979. Print.

Carter, Vincent O. *The Bern Book; a Record of a Voyage of the Mind*. New York: John Day, 1973. Print.

Cooppan, Vilashini. "The Double Politics of Double Consciousness: Nationalism and Globalism in the Souls of Black Folk." *Public Culture* 17.2 (2005): 299. Print.

Cronan, Todd. "The Aesthetic Politics of Affect | Nonsite.org." *Nonsiteorg RSS*. N.p., 2012. Web. <<http://nonsite.org/review/radically-private-and-pretty-uncoded>>.

Dewsbury, John-David. "Witnessing Space: 'knowledge without Contemplation'" *Environment and Planning A* 35.11 (2003): 1907-932. Print.

Dunbar, Earnest. *The Black Expatriates : A Study of American Negroes in Exile*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1968. Print.

Eisinger, Peter. "Is Detroit Dead?" *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36.1 (2014): 1-12. Print.

Elgrably, Jordan. "James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78." Interview. *Paris Review* 1984: n. pag. Print.

Ellis, Aimé J. *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 2011. Print.

Fabre, Michel. *The World of Richard Wright*. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 1985. Print.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto, 1986. Print.

Fanon, Frantz, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Constance Farrington. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 1965. Print.

Feldman, Keith. "'fuga'." *Postmodern Culture* 18.3 (2008): n. pag. Print.

Flink, James J. *The Automobile Age*. Cambridge,: MIT, 1990. Print.

Gaines, Kevin Kelly. *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2006. Print.

Gilroy, Paul. *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010. Print.

Gilroy, Paul. "Driving While Black." *Car Cultures*. By Daniel Miller. Oxford: Berg, 2001. N. pag. Print.

Giroux, Henry. "Hope in the Age of Looming Authoritarianism." *Truthout*. N.p., 02 Dec. 2013. Web. <<http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/20307-hope-in-the-age-of-looming-authoritarianism>>.

Gordon, Lewis, and Linda Alcoff. "A Philosophical Account of Africana Studies: An Interview with Lewis Gordon." *Nepantla: Views from South* 4.1 (2003): 165-89. Web.

Gordon, Lewis. "On the Borders of Anonymity and Superfluous Identity." *Cultural Dynamics* 12.2 (n.d.): 376-83. Web.

Grossberg, Lawrence. *We Gotta Get out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. New

York: Routledge, 1992. Print.

Halberstam, Jack. "Introduction." Introduction. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. By Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. N.p.: Minor Compositions, n.d. N. pag. Print.

Hames-Garcia, Michael Roy. *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2004. Print.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.

Harney, Stefano, Fred Moten, and Jack Halberstam. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. N.p.: n.p., 2013. Print.

Hartman, Saidiya V., and Frank Wilderson, III. "THE POSITION OF THE UNTHOUGHT." *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 183-201. JSTOR. Web. Apr. 2014.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.

Hartman, Saidiya V. "The Time of Slavery." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (2002): 757-77. Print.

Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End, 1992. Print.

Hooks, Bell. *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*. New York: H. Holt, 1997. Print.

The Invisible Committee. *The Coming Insurrection*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009. Print.

Jackson, George. *Soledad Brother; the Prison Letters of George Jackson*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1970. Print.

Jan-mohamed, Abdul R. "Negating the Negation as a Form of Affirmation in Minority Discourse: The Construction of Richard Wright as Subject." *Cultural Critique* No. 7. The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II (1987): 245-66. JSTOR. Web. Apr. 2014.

Jensen, Ole B. "Flows of Meaning, Cultures of Movements – Urban Mobility as Meaningful Everyday Life Practice." *Mobilities* 4.1 (2009): 139-58. Print.

Jensen, Ole. "Flows of Meaning, Cultures of Movements - Urban Mobility as Meaningful Everyday Life Practice." *Mobilities* 4.1 (2009): 139-58. Print.

Jensen, Tim. "Emotional Terrain of Neoliberalism." *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 8 (2011): Web.

- Johnson, Nuala Christina. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 243. Print.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon, 2002. Print.
- Kenan, Randall. *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Knopf, 1999. Print.
- Koerner, Michelle. "Lines of Escape: Gilles Deleuze's Encounter with George Jackson." *Genre* 44.2 (2011): 157-80. Web.
- Lamming, George. *The Pleasures of Exile*. London: Michael Joseph, 1960. Print.
- Latham, Alan, and Derek P. McCormack. "Moving Cities: Rethinking the Materialities of Urban Geographies." *Progress in Human Geography* 28.6 (2004): 701-24. Print.
- Lynch, Kevin. *Good City Form*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1984. Print.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. *Bedouin Hornbook*. Lexington: U of Kentucky, 1986. Print.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. "CANTE MORO." *Disembodied Poetics: Annals of the Jack Kerouac School*. By Anne Waldman and Andrew Schelling. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico, 1994. 71. Print.
- Macrorie, Ken. "The Objectivity-Subjectivity Trap." *The Antioch Review* 24.4 (1964): 479. Print.
- Marriott, D. S. *On Black Men*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000. Print.
- Marshall, Stephen. "The Political Life of Fungibility." *Theory & Event* 15.3 (2012): n. pag. Web.
- Marx, Karl. "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret." *Karl Marx Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. London: n.p., 1928. 163. Print.
- Matlon, Jordanna. "Creating Public Fictions: The Black Man as Producer and Consumer." *The Black Scholar* 40.3 (2010): 36-42. Print.
- McKeon, Olive. "Oh What a Mess/Aesthetics and Political Praxis- by Olive McKeon." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*. N.p., 2011. Web. <<http://www.joaap.org/issue8/mckeon.htm>>.
- Metzelaar, Helen. "A Hefty Confrontation: The Fisk Jubilee Singers Tour the Netherlands in 1877." *Tijdschrift Van De Koninklijke Vereniging Voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 55.1 (2005): 67-86. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2003. Print.

Myrdal, Gunnar. *Objectivity in Social Research: The 1967 Wimmer Lecture, by Gunnar Myrdal*. New York: Pantheon, 1969. Print.

Ng, Maria Noëlle. *Three Exotic Views of Southeast Asia: The Travel Narratives of Isabella Bird, Max Dauthendey, and Ai Wu, 1850-1930*. White Plains, NY: EastBridge, 2002. Print.

Ngo, Bic. *Unresolved Identities: Discourse, Ambivalence, and Urban Immigrant Students*. Albany: SUNY, 2010. Print.

Okpewho, Isidore, Carole Boyce Davies, and Ali Al'Amin. Mazrui. *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. Print.

Patton, J.W. *Transportation Worlds: Designing Infrastructures and Forms of Urban Life*. Thesis. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2004. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

Pinckney, Darryl. *Out There: Mavericks of Black Literature*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2002. Print.

Popke, E. Jeffrey. "Poststructuralist Ethics: Subjectivity, Responsibility and the Space of Community." *Progress in Human Geography* 27.3 (2003): 298-316. Print.

Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. Cambridge,: MIT, 1995. Print.

Rowell, Charles Henry. "'Words Don't Go There': An Interview with Fred Moten." *Callaloo* 27.4, Contemporary African-American Poetry: A New Wave (2004): 954-66. JSTOR. Web. Apr. 2014.

Saldanha, Arun. *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2007. Print.

Saldanha, Arun. "Skin, Affect, Aggregation: Guattarian Variations on Fanon." *Environment and Planning A* 42.10 (2010): 2414. Print.

Schein, Richard H. "The Place of Landscape: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting an American Scene." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87.4 (1997): 660-80. Print.

Schein, Richard H. "Seeing Seeing Seeing The Legal Landscape." *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*. By Jamie Winders and Nuala Christina Johnson. Wiley Blackwell, 2013. 243. Print.

Sexton, Jared. "Raw Life: An Introduction." *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 53-62. JSTOR. Web. Apr. 2014.

Sexton, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *InTensions Journal* 5 (2011): n. pag. Web.

Slaughter, John Brooks. *Brother in the Bush: An African American's Search for Self in East Africa*. Chicago: Agate, 2005. Print.

Smith, Virginia Whatley. *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2001. Print.

Solnit, Rebecca. "Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the Post-American Landscape." *Harper's Magazine* 1 July 2007: n. pag. Print.

Stew, Heidi Rodewald, and Annie Dorsen. *Passing Strange: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema, 2009. Print.

Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996. Print.

Tennessen, Herman. *Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness*. Edmonton: S.n., n.d. Print.

Thompson, Marie, and Ian D. Biddle. *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Print.

Thrift, N. J. "Life, but Not as We Know." *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008. 14. Print.

Urry, John. *Mobilities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007. Print.

Wacquant, Loci. "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration." *New Left Review*. N.p., 2002. Web. Apr. 2014.

Wacquant, Loci. "Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium." *Urban Studies* 36.10 (1999): 1639-647. Web.

Wamba, Philippe E. *Kinship: A Family's Journey in Africa and America*. New York: Dutton, 1999. Print.

Weik, Alexa. "The Uses and Hazards of Expatriation": Richard Wright's Cosmopolitanism in Process." *African American Review* 41.3 (2007): 459-75. Jstor. Web. 2014.

Welsch, Wolfgang. "Aestheticization Processes: Phenomena, Distinctions and Prospects." *Theory, Culture and Society* 13.1 (1996): n. pag. Print.

West, Cornel. "Black Strivings In a Twilight Civilization." *The Cornel West Reader*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas, 1999. 102. Print.

Wright, Richard. "Ethics of Living Jim Crow." *Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938. 11. Print.

Wright, Richard. *Pagan Spain*. New York: Harper, 1957. Print.

Younge, Gary. *No Place like Home: A Black Briton's Journey through the American South*. Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi, 2002. Print.

Zaborowska, Magdalena J. *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. Print.

Vita:
Calvin Walds was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan in July of 1990.

Notes On This Project
read down or left to right

This project was really about how
I liked to take the bus
And think
Looking out the window,
Listening to music
Clarity
It was about how
Each of those components were central to thought
That it wasn't just the music, or the gradual procession of the bus
Or the world outside my window
Or the other passengers that surrounded me in my solitude
But how these components intermingled
This project was about a fascination with movement
How movement was central
Is life
This project was about making sense of violence
That is blackness
And looking for love (and affection)
How blackness disrupts any normative concept
Forces you to rethink and reconsider
It is also about how a state of contradiction, of paradox, of ambivalence can be default
And thus it is the attempt of resolution and neatness that is nonsensical
It is about the body
And other bodies
Mingling together
About looking beneath and beyond
Fugitivity wasn't just about politics
Yet I was always afraid that I was valorizing, romanticizing
Dr. Curry calls hope a delusion
But we gotta believe in something
But I suppose one can believe in something other than hope,
Since hope has gotten all caught in neoliberalism and pacification
But I'm not sure what that belief looks like
yet
This project was about writing to provoke thought

Yes there is anti-blackness, but what next
I have a few lingering thoughts
One about what being from Detroit does to the political imagination,
A paper that I see in the future with a little geography and some political theory
The other is something that is coming out of Camus and Levinas and Moten
About how perhaps this is the best of all possible worlds
Because *this is* the world
And this is not to concede
But to think of how
In a situation like enslavement
Brute force, absolute terror
Escaping to forest,
living underground, literally
was an escape
unaccomplished, incomplete
it went nowhere, to the periphery of the plantation
but, as Moten wrote
is a thing that we must grow to love.